

JEWS IN THE POLITICAL LIFE OF ABBASID BAGHDAD, 908-1258

by

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## Dissertation Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the relationship between the Abbasid caliphate and the Jews of medieval Baghdad. I use medieval Arabic chronicles as well as Judeo-Arabic and Hebrew documents preserved in the Cairo Geniza to re-evaluate the role of Jews and Jewish institutions in medieval Islamic political life. At the beginning of the tenth century, the descendants of the original redactors of the Babylonian Talmud, the geonim of Sura and Pumbedita, relocated to the Abbasid imperial capital of Baghdad and promoted the authority of the Babylonian Talmud. They positioned themselves as halakhic arbiters for Jewish communities throughout the Islamic world, and over the next 300 years, most of world Jewry came to accept the Babylonian Talmud as authoritative, even as they questioned the exact claims to Halakhic supremacy that the geonim made. My dissertation contends that these seemingly internal Jewish communal conflicts cannot be understood in isolation from the Islamic political context in which they occurred.

Scholars of Islamic and Jewish history have long assumed that non-Muslims in the Islamic world lived in closed, autonomous communities and thus played a largely static and negligible role in Islamic political history. By contrast, I find not only that Jews were embedded in a wide variety of social organizations in Abbasid Baghdad that included political administration, but also that Jewish officials engaged in mutually-beneficial patron-client relationships with Muslim courtiers. Throughout centuries of Abbasid rule, rabbinic leaders, including the Babylonian geonim, appealed to their allies within the Islamic government to advance their claims to authority over their co-religionists. Indeed, they often deployed Islamic state power against their fellow Jews. In identifying and tracing a reciprocal relationship between

elite rabbinic Jews and the Abbasid state over time, my dissertation re-conceptualizes the methods deployed in the exercise of medieval rabbinic authority.

The dissertation is structured chronologically. The first four chapters examine developments in Jewish communal and political life under each successive Islamic regime in Baghdad: the Abbasid caliphs al-Muqtadir and al-Qāhir (c. 890-945; chapter 1); the Shiite Buyid Emirs who ruled in the name of the Abbasid caliphs and presided over a period of political fragmentation (c. 945-1055; chapter 2); the Sunni Seljuq Sultans who deposed the Buyids and competed with the Abbasid caliphs to re-assert centralized Sunni authority (c. 1055-1157; chapter 3); and the later Abbasid caliphs who defeated the Seljuqs and ruled the city independently until the Mongol conquest (1158-1258; chapter 4). Chapter 5 examines how the changing relationship between the Babylonian geonim and Jewish communities in the Mediterranean during the eleventh and twelfth centuries impacted the construction of Babylonianrabbinic authority in medieval Jewish historiographic texts.

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## Introduction

In 928, the Jewish exilarch in Baghdad, David b. Zakkay, appointed Sa'adya b. Yosef al-Fayyūmī as Gaon, or leader of the Yeshiva of Sura in Baghdad, a center of legal authority for Jews from throughout the Islamic world and beyond. He chose Sa'adya in recognition of his erudition and the forcefulness with which he defended Babylonian Rabbinic Judaism against its many rivals.

But just two years later, a dispute broke out between the two men. According to the Judeo-Arabic chronicle of Natan ha-Bavli (c. 950s) later translated into Hebrew, the conflict began when two men under the exilarch's jurisdiction were engaged in a legal dispute with each other over their inheritance. They came to an agreement to divide the money and donate a portion of it to the exilarch. The exilarch wanted the geonim to sign off on the agreement. Sa'adya, however, refused to do so. The exilarch was incensed at Sa'adya's refusal to sign, and the conflict escalated. One of Sa'adya's supporters threw his shoe at the exilarch's son. In retaliation, the exilarch excommunicated Sa'adya and appointed a different gaon in his place. Meanwhile, Sa'adya appointed the exilarch's brother as a counter-exilarch. The conflict essentially divided Baghdad's Rabbanite Jews into two rival factions. According to Natan, "All of the rich men of Baghdad and the students of the yeshiva and the courtiers supported Rav Sa'adya with bribes and by advocating his cause in front of the king (the Abbasid caliph) and his ministers and his advisors."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Neubauer, MJC, II, 80.



Why did prominent rabbinic leaders invite the Muslim authorities to intervene in what was seemingly an internal Jewish conflict? Who were these “rich men” who bribed the king, his ministers, and his advisors on behalf of their rabbinic allies? And what can this tell us, more broadly, about the relationship between political power and the exercise of rabbinic authority in the medieval Islamic world? This dissertation seeks to answer these questions by tracing the relationship between Jews and the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad over a period of 350 years.

## Historical Background

Iraq (*Bavel*) was home to one of the most ancient and significant Jewish communities in the Near East. Jews had resided in Iraq continuously since the Babylonian exile of 586 BCE. After the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 136 CE, it became the center of the development of rabbinic Judaism. Rabbis within Iraq attracted disciples, to whom they transmitted oral traditions, and these disciples in turn passed on the traditions to their students. Sometime between 450 and 600, these more informal circles of disciples around individual rabbis transformed into hierarchical “academies” called *yeshivot* (sing: *yeshiva*/Aramaic: *metivta*), the most prominent of which were located in Sura and Pumbedita. This organizational change coincided with the writing down of the earlier traditions and their redaction into what would become known as the Babylonian Talmud.<sup>2</sup>

By the year 500 CE, the Jewish population of Iraq had reached a peak of as many as two million Jews, making it the largest and most concentrated population of Jews in the world.<sup>3</sup> The majority of Jews were laborers involved in agriculture, and most were quite poor, although a

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<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Rubenstein, “The Rise of the Babylonian Rabbinic Academy: A Reexamination of the Talmudic Evidence,” *JSIJ* 1 (2002), 55-68.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 308.

small minority developed a great deal of wealth through long-distance trade. Some of these wealthy Jews conducted themselves like Persian officials.<sup>4</sup>

The most important of these Jewish officials was the exilarch (*resh galuta*), the scion of an aristocratic family whom the Sasanians (r. 224-651) recognized as the head of the Jewish community and its representative at court. The exilarch collected taxes on behalf of the Persian authorities and otherwise supervised Jewish communal affairs.<sup>5</sup> Rabbinic Jews legitimated the exilarch by ascribing to him Davidic descent, giving his very rule messianic implications. As living heirs to the House of David, even in exile, they represented the personification of the biblical verse, “the scepter does not depart from Judah” (Gen. 49:10).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the exilarch was one of many figures competing for authority over Babylonia’s Jews.

Some of the rabbis also held positions in the exilarch’s administration. This likely facilitated the spread of the “rabbinic way of life” among other segments of the population. A rabbinic market inspector, for example, enforced rabbinic dietary restrictions, while rabbinic judges applied Talmudic law to daily life.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, many rabbis characterized the exilarch in distinctly negative terms and criticized his rule; they described him as negligent in his religious observance and corrupted through his close association with Persian culture. Some questioned the very notion of a Jewish “king” from a theological perspective, arguing that Jews could not have a king until the coming of the messiah and their return to the Land of Israel.<sup>8</sup>

In 651, the Muslims conquered Iraq, bringing centuries of Persian rule to an end. The Umayyad Caliphate established its capital in Damascus and ruled over an empire stretching from

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<sup>4</sup> Morony, *Iraq*, 311.

<sup>5</sup> Morony, *Iraq*, 316

<sup>6</sup> Morony, *Iraq*, 317.

<sup>7</sup> Morony, *Iraq*, 319.

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Herman, *A Prince without a Kingdom: The Exilarch in the Sasanian Era* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

Spain in the west to Central Asia in the east. In 750, the Abbasid Dynasty successfully overthrew the Umayyads, and in 762, they transferred the imperial capital from Damascus and established a new city, Baghdad, as their capital about 30 kilometers from the former Persian capital city of Ctesiphon. This meant that Iraq transitioned from being a provincial territory to the heart of the Islamic Empire. The Jewish exilarch and the Nestorian Christian patriarch relocated to Baghdad and received official recognition from the Abbasid State.<sup>9</sup> By the end of the ninth century, some wealthy Jewish merchants came to hold positions as bankers (*jahbadhs*) at the Abbasid court, serving as money-changers and using their connections to long-distance mercantile credit networks to advance loans to the state. Jews continued to serve as Abbasid financial administrators in Baghdad until the Mongol conquest of 1258.

The Abbasid political transformation did not necessarily have an immediate impact on most of Iraq's Jews. Although some moved to Baghdad, the vast majority remained in more rural areas, continued to work as tenant farmers, and communicated primarily in their native Aramaic, not the imperial language of Arabic. The rabbinic yeshivot, now presided over by officials known as *geonim*, remained in Sura and Pumbedita, as well. Yet they were now at the heart of a large empire, and they seem to have used connections with long-distance merchants to spread their religious message and accrue loyalists throughout the empire. They promoted themselves as the guardians of the most authentic Jewish tradition in the world, claiming that rival rabbinic traditions, such as those of the Yeshivot of Palestine, had been corrupted or lost due to Byzantine persecution.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Historians have assumed that the establishment of Baghdad led to a large Jewish migration from rural parts of Iraq to economic opportunities in the new capital. More recently, Phillip Ackerman-Lieberman has challenged this assumption, calling attention to the various economic developments in rural Iraq during this period and cautioning historians from making demographic claims based on a small quantity of evidence. Ackerman-Lieberman, "Revisiting Jewish Occupational Choice and Urbanization in Iraq under the Early Abbasids," *Jewish History* 29 (2015), 113-135.

<sup>10</sup> Brody, *Geonim*, 113-116.

At the end of the ninth and beginning of the tenth century, the rabbinic yeshivot relocated to the imperial capital of Baghdad, where they would remain for the next four centuries. The cultural implications of this were enormous. Jews affiliated with the yeshivot came to communicate in Arabic, rather than their ancestral Aramaic. Rabbinic leaders, including the geonim, composed works of philosophy, theology, grammar, and religious law in Arabic along the model of contemporaneous Arabic and Islamic texts. The rabbis even came to share a legal vocabulary with their Muslim contemporaries.

But this move would also have major political implications for the Jewish community. The primary institutions of Jewish communal leadership, the exilarchate and the geonic yeshivot, now resided together in the Abbasid imperial capital, along with a group of Jewish government officials. Their interactions with each other and with the Abbasid State over the next 350 years form the subject of this dissertation.

## **Scope**

This dissertation constitutes the first monograph-length study of the relationship between the Jews of Baghdad and the Abbasid State. It begins in 908, when the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir came to power. During his reign, Jews began holding new kinds of government positions in greater numbers than they had previously. Around this time, both the Yeshiva of Sura and the Yeshiva of Pumbedita relocated to Baghdad. This dissertation concludes in 1258, when the Mongol conquest of Baghdad brought 500 years of Abbasid rule in the city to an end.

I focus on Baghdad due to the city's centrality for medieval Judaism and Islam. Baghdad was home to some of the most enduring Jewish religious and communal institutions in the middle ages, including the descendants of the redactors of the Babylonian Talmud, the *geonim*,

who played a formative role in the construction and development of post-Talmudic rabbinic Judaism and positioned themselves as legal arbiters for Jewish communities throughout the Islamic world. Consequently, many documents composed by Jewish elites in Baghdad were preserved in the Cairo Geniza, a storeroom for used manuscripts in the Ben Ezra Synagogue of Fustat (old Cairo), and they constitute the largest extant corpus of documents from Abbasid Baghdad. No such documentary cache has survived from Baghdad's East Syriac Christian community, also called Nestorians, the city's other significant non-Muslim group. The survival of so much Jewish historiographic, literary, legal, and documentary material from Abbasid Baghdad in the Cairo Geniza allows us to study the political life of non-Muslims in their own words—and even their own handwriting.

As the seat of the Sunni Abbasid caliph, Baghdad served as the imperial capital of the Eastern Islamic world for over 600 years until the Mongol conquest in 1258, and it played a formative role in the development of Islamic governing institutions and ideologies. During the three hundred years this dissertation examines, Baghdad was governed according to four distinct Islamic political organizations: the Abbasid caliphs Al-Muqtadir and Al-Qāhir (c. 908-945); the Shiite-Buyid Emirs who ruled in the name of the Abbasid caliphs (c. 945-1055); the Sunni-Seljuq Sultans who deposed the Buyids (1055-1157); and the later Abbasid caliphs (1160-1258). This makes it an ideal setting for investigating the impact of changes in Islamic political life, particularly the centralization, fragmentation, and revitalization of the Caliphate, on non-Muslims. Moreover, Baghdad was a magnet for Muslim scholars and jurists from all over the Islamic world; these scholars recorded the major events that took place in the city in historical chronicles, many of which were published in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As a result, texts produced in Abbasid Baghdad continue to be accessible to scholars today.

## Historiography

Scholars of Jewish and rabbinic studies have long understood the “classical geonic era” in Babylonia (c. 650-1040) as crucial for explaining the development of Jewish religious culture and law (*Halakha*).<sup>11</sup> The geonic era bridges the gap between the writing of the Talmud in Late Antiquity and the rabbinic culture of the middle ages, when the Talmud was accepted as authoritative throughout the Jewish world. During the past 150 years, scholars have published texts from the geniza that revolutionized our understanding of the intellectual and cultural world of the Babylonian geonim, their followers in communities across the Mediterranean, and their rivals, including the Palestinian geonim, Karaites, and other groups.<sup>12</sup> Still, the majority of the scholarship on the geonic era follows normative rabbinic-halakhic narratives, assuming that the Babylonian yeshivot ceased playing a meaningful role in rabbinic history after the middle of the eleventh century when communities in the western Mediterranean emerged as the new “centers” of halakhic authority.

Fewer scholars have approached the geonic material from the standpoint of social or political rather than halakhic history. Those scholars who did attempt such an analysis followed a dominant paradigm in Jewish Studies which assumed that the medieval Jewish community constituted an autonomous corporate, self-governing body largely separated from its Muslim and

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<sup>11</sup> Heinrich Graetz was the first modern scholar to identify the geonic era in this manner. See *Graetz, History of the Jews* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1894), Vol. III, 86-187.

<sup>12</sup> For the most up-to-date synthesis of the scholarship on the geonim, see Robert Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture* (Yale: Yale UP, 1998; 2013), especially the updated bibliography in the paperback edition. On the relations between the Babylonian yeshivot and local communities, see Menahem Ben Sasson, *The Emergence of the Local Jewish Community in the Muslim World: Qayrawan, 800-1057* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), 401-425.

Christian neighbors.<sup>13</sup> As Jacob Mann, the first true social historian of the geonic era wrote, “Apart from the political and economic conditions that were on the whole controlled by his Gentile masters, with now and then a high Jewish official...protecting actively Jewish interests, the Jew lived his own communal life in devotion to his traditional ideals and practices.”<sup>14</sup>

Salo Baron was the first modern Jewish historian to describe the Jews of the middle ages as political actors. Although he did not dispute the notion that Jews formed an autonomous, corporate unit, as early as 1928 he argued that Jews engaged in political relations with gentile rulers; they made themselves useful to kings in exchange for royal protection. In this regard, Jews were not lowly serfs but privileged servants of monarchs.

If Baron thought about what Jews meant to gentile rulers, Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi considered what this “royal alliance” meant for the Jews, themselves. In 2002, he argued that throughout Jewish history in the diaspora, Jews always placed their faith in the hands of monarchs. Yerushalmi contended that Jews continued to believe in this “myth of the royal alliance” even during times of royal persecution. This faith that the king would ultimately intervene to protect the Jewish community served to fortify and console a community in exile.

Even as this model allows for a greater appreciation of Jewish political thought and agency in the pre-modern period, it also presents a rather static picture of pre-modern Jewish politics across both time and space. Jews might constantly renegotiate their relationship with the monarch, but these negotiations played little if any role in the internal organization of the community itself. For Yerushalmi, contemporaneous historical events did not fundamentally alter the political actions of or ideologies expressed by Jewish communal leaders. It is important

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<sup>13</sup> This model reached its apotheosis in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in the works of Yitzhak Baer. See Baer, *Galut* (Berlin, 1936), and “The Origins of Jewish Communal Organization in the Middle Ages” (Hebrew) *Zion* 15 (1950), 1-41.

<sup>14</sup> Jacob Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature: Vol. 1* (Cincinnati: HUC Press, 1931), 2.

to note that Yerushalmi and Baron developed this concept of the royal alliance with regard only to Christian Europe and not the Islamic world.

Nevertheless, historians of Jewish communities in the Islamic world during the twentieth century assumed that these paradigms applied equally to Jewish political organization under Islam. Even S.D. Goitein, whose *Mediterranean Society* revolutionized our understanding of the social boundaries between Jews and Muslims echoed this; he called the Jewish community of the medieval Islamic Mediterranean “a state within the state and beyond the state.”<sup>15</sup> By this he meant that the Jews of the Islamic world constituted an autonomous corporate body within their own state and relied on the caliph for protection, but they owed loyalty to Jewish religious authorities in foreign, sometimes even hostile territories. In this regard, Jewish political organization in the medieval Islamic world operated mostly in isolation from Islamic political life.

Menahem Ben Sasson integrated the study of geonic history with Goitein’s insights about Mediterranean history. He brought attention to the role long-distance Jewish merchants played fostering relations between the geonic centers and local communities by transporting letters, responsa, and donations on their behalf. In this model, the relations between the geonic yeshivot and local communities were affected, not only by internal Jewish developments, but by larger geo-political developments that altered trading patterns and transportation networks. Still, this “Mediterranean” model understands the Jewish community as autonomous, and it does not consider how relations between rabbinic leaders and state power may have impacted the exercise of geonic authority within these networks.

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<sup>15</sup> S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society* Vol. II, 403.



In contrast to more traditional understandings of geonic authority, which asserted that the geonim ruled over Jewish communities in the Islamicate world with an iron fist, Ben Sasson found that local communities in the Mediterranean functioned largely independently from the yeshivot from the ninth century onwards. This allowed him to ask the question, then, of why local communities chose to rhetorically position themselves as subordinate to the Babylonian yeshivot. Ben Sasson argues that the Babylonian yeshivot were most significant for the symbolic authority which they could confer on local leaders. This ascribes a distinctly political significance to the geonim, one which Ben Sasson compared to the role of Muslim caliphs in their relations with regional Muslim leaders.<sup>16</sup>

More recently, Arnold Franklin's study of the importance of Davidic lineage in the Islamic East brings attention to the influence of Islamic concepts of authority and legitimation on Jews. But it does not take into account the actual ties between Jewish leaders and Islamic political power.

Moshe Gil recognized the importance of Islamic sources for reconstructing Babylonian Jewish history, and he identified many Jewish and Islamic sources relating to this era which had not been available to previous scholars. His work provides the foundation for future scholars to more thoroughly investigate this history.<sup>17</sup>

More recent work has upended our understanding of the political boundaries between Jews and Muslims. Analyses of documents from Fatimid Egypt, medieval Iberia, and the Ottoman Empire have demonstrated that Jews, rather than zealously guarding their communal autonomy, often appealed to gentile political and legal authorities. Uriel Simonsohn has recently

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<sup>16</sup> Menahem Ben Sasson, *The Emergence of the Local Jewish Community in the Muslim World: Qayrawan, 800-1057* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), 401-425.

<sup>17</sup> Moshe Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael* (Hebrew, 4 vols.) (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv UP, 1997).

described the medieval Islamic world as characterized by “legal pluralism”; Jews and Christians were not confined to the legal institutions of their respective religious communities but often made use of Islamic legal venues. A scholarly consensus has emerged that it is inaccurate to characterize the Jewish community of the pre-modern Islamic world as fully autonomous.<sup>18</sup>

If the Jewish community was not, in fact, politically autonomous in the way that scholars have assumed, then changes in Islamic political life would also have an impact on the internal life of the Jewish community. As this dissertation contends, we cannot fully comprehend medieval rabbinic authority without understanding the rabbis’ many ties to Islamic state power.

### Jewish Government Officials in the Medieval Islamic World

In both Christian Europe and the Islamic world, Jews held a distinct, subordinate status. Yet despite their subjugation, Jews were employed by Christian and Muslim governments; often, they rose to positions of great power. Non-Muslims (*dhimmīs*) served in Islamic administrations from the first Islamic conquests and continued to hold administrative positions throughout the middle ages and into the Ottoman period.

The first scholar to investigate the phenomenon of the “court Jew” in the Islamic world was Walter Fischel in 1937. The sources that Fischel identified discussing court Jews are indispensable, and he was one of the few scholars to integrate the study of Arabic chronicle sources and documentary evidence from the Geniza.<sup>19</sup> Yet even as he incorporated geniza sources into his analysis, Fischel still assumed a model of Jewish communal autonomy whereby these individuals played a relatively negligible role in Jewish communal life relative to more traditional rabbinic leaders. He did not consider how these officials’ relations with the Abbasid

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<sup>18</sup> Rustow, “The Genizah and Jewish Communal History,” 312-314.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Fischel, *Jews in the Economic and Political Life of Medieval Islam* (New York: Ktav, 1937; 1969).

state might have impacted Baghdad's Jewish communal leadership or exercise of rabbinic authority among Jews.

There have been no subsequent systematic studies of Jewish government officials in Abbasid Iraq, and scholars have largely left Fischel's analysis of the significance of Jews in Abbasid financial administration unchallenged. Nevertheless, throughout his work, Fischel assumed that Jews played a central role in the economic life of the medieval Islamic world, even though the sources that he presents merely indicate that, in addition to a much larger and more significant population of Muslims and Christian government officials, a relatively small number of individual Jews acted as financial administrators in medieval Islamic states. Moreover, he elides important distinctions between the relative significance and function of individual Jewish officials in different regions. As a result, he conflates the high status of the Jew Ya'aqūb b. Killis (d. 991), who served as vizier to the Fatimid caliph with the lower-prestige Jewish financial administrators of Abbasid Iraq.

Indeed, most evidence indicates that Jews were fairly marginal figures in Abbasid governance, especially when compared to their Christian counterparts. Many Nestorian Christians served as court secretaries (*kuttāb*) and played a central role in the transmission of classical Greek philosophy into the Islamic world and the development of Abbasid courtly culture.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, Jews seem to have played a minimal role in these transformative movements.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For studies of Nestorian Christian secretaries in Abbasid Baghdad, see Jean-Maurice Fiey, *Chrétiens Syriaques sous les Abbassides surtout à Bagdad, 749–1258* (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1980) and Cécile Cabrol, *Les Secrétaires Nestoriens à Bagdad, 762–1258 AD* (Beyrouth: Université Saint-Joseph, 2012). On their role in the Greco-Arabic translation movement, see Dmitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society* (New York: Routledge, 1998). On their prominence in intellectual life in Baghdad during the Buyid period, see Joel Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival During the Buyid Age* (Leiden: Brill, 1986).

<sup>21</sup> Mohammad Hannan Hassan, "Where were the Jews in the development of sciences in medieval Islam? A quantitative analysis of two medieval Muslim biographical notices," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 81 (2010), 105-

Furthermore, unlike in Fatimid Egypt or Umayyad Spain, Jews in Iraq never rose to positions of great prominence at the Abbasid court. There was no Jewish vizier in Iraq along the model of Ya‘aqūb b. Killis and Abu Sa‘ad al-Tustarī in Fatimid Egypt or Ḥasday b. Shaprut and Shemu‘el Ha-Nagid in Spain. Unlike in Ayyubid Egypt, where Maimonides served as the physician to sultan Salāḥ al-Din, no Jews served as court physicians to the Abbasid caliph. Instead, in Abbasid Baghdad, Jews served mainly as lower-level financial administrators, and Arabic chroniclers did not discuss them in great detail. They instead referred to Jews, mostly in passing, as bankers (*jahbadhs*), responsible for collecting and exchanging money and also advancing loans to the state and safeguarding the assets of various Muslim officials; as tax collectors; and as mint officials. Although the most prominent Jews in Abbasid governance appear to have been financial administrators, Muslims and Christians also served in these roles; it is unclear if a majority of these officials were, in fact, Jewish.

Most studies of the Abbasid bureaucracy devote little attention to these figures. Yet although they may have been somewhat marginal in the social life of the Abbasid court, they played a crucial role in Abbasid governance, connecting the state to long-distance mercantile networks thus ensuring that it had access to the credit necessary to pay all of its expenses and that its monetary system continued to function. By following a group of *jahbadhs* through four distinct political regimes in Baghdad, this dissertation will also give insight into continuities and changes in Abbasid financial administration over 350 years.

Although they may not have been as highly-ranked as Jewish officials in other parts of the Islamic world, Jewish *jahbadhs* in Abbasid Iraq also served as mediators between Jews and the state. During most of this period, Geonic sources characterized Jewish *jahbadhs* as

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126. The question of why Christians were more prominent in Abbasid administration than Jews is outside of the scope of this dissertation, though it likely has to do with a continuation of patterns from Sassanian administration.

prestigious high-level government officials who enjoyed the respect of their Muslim contemporaries. This dissertation will shed light on the various roles that Jewish *jahbadhs* played in advancing and challenging the authority of various Jewish leaders, both within Baghdad and across the Mediterranean.

### Institutions in the Medieval Near East

By tracing the history of Jewish institutions in the medieval Islamic world, this dissertation contributes to a long-standing discussion about the stability of institutions in the late antique and medieval Near East.<sup>22</sup>

In the first half of the twentieth century, scholars of the medieval Near East sought to find parallels to the allegedly “stable” institutions of the medieval Latin West, such as guilds. In failing to find such evidence, these scholars concluded that the Islamic world lacked “stable” institutions, especially after the collapse of the Abbasid Caliphate in the mid-tenth century. Jewish historians also identified the major “institutions” of the Jewish communities in the Near East such as the geonic yeshivot, but tended to assume that these institutions were in a state of “decline” by the tenth century.<sup>23</sup>

The next generation of social historians of the medieval Near East argued that institutions were not a useful category for understanding the societies they studied. Following Clifford Geertz<sup>24</sup>, they shifted their attention from “institutions” to “individuals.” Abraham Udovitch, for

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<sup>22</sup> This section largely summarizes an argument about institutions in the Near East which has already been made by Marina Rustow and Eve Krakowski in their upcoming article in *Jewish Social Studies*. I am summarizing the scholarship here because it demonstrates the reasons why this dissertation proposes an institutional history and the ways in which an institutional history can contribute to a broader discussion about social structure in the medieval Near East.

<sup>23</sup> Louis Ginzburg, *Geonica* (New York: JTS, 1909).

<sup>24</sup> For more on Geertz’s influence on the field of Islamic social history and the problem of institutions in the medieval Near East more generally, see the upcoming article in *Jewish Social Studies*: Marina Rustow, Eve Krakowski, “Formula as Content: Medieval Jewish Institutions, the Cairo Geniza and the New Diplomats.”

example, argued that trade in the Islamic world was characterized by informal relationships between individuals, rather than legal or institutional mechanisms.<sup>25</sup> Goitein even devoted an entire volume of *A Mediterranean Society* to “The Individual.” Most influentially for Islamic studies, Roy Mottahadeh argued that Buyid Iraq was characterized by informal institutions but formalized ties. This theory helped him to explain the resilience of society amidst so-called “institutional decline” after the collapse of the Abbasid caliphate. Many subsequent scholars have found Mottahadeh’s insights about Buyid Iraq useful for analyzing medieval Islamic social structure.<sup>26</sup>

A new generation of historians has challenged the individual-centered model and has found evidence for robust institutions in the medieval Near East. In contrast to Udovitch, Jessica Goldberg argued that medieval Islamic trade was based on a great deal more than informal, face-to-face agreements between individuals. Rather, eleventh century merchants shared “a well-developed, broadly shared and known set of standard contracts across the Islamic world which allowed individuals to put their goods in the hands of others and rely on the strong property protections of markets and courts.”<sup>27</sup> Phillip Ackerman-Lieberman found that Jewish merchants made formal partnership agreements in Jewish courts according to Jewish law.<sup>28</sup> This suggests

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<sup>25</sup> Avraham Udovitch, *Partnership and Profit in Medieval Islam*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970).

<sup>26</sup> Eg, Michael Chamberlain’s discussion of elite households in Damascus, Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190-1350* (Cambridge University Press, 1994); Jonathan Berkey’s analysis of education in Ayyubid Cairo, Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005); Daphna Ephrat’s work on *madrasas* in Seljuq Baghdad, Ephrat, *A learned Society in a Period of Transition: the Sunni "Ulama" of Eleventh Century Baghdad* (Albany: SUNY UP, 2000). Also, for Arabic-speaking Jews’ use of institutions of patronage, see Marina Rustow, “Formal and Informal Patronage Among Jews in the Islamic East: Evidence from the Cairo Geniza,” *Al Qantara* XXIX (2008).

<sup>27</sup> Jessica Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: the Geniza Merchants and their Business World* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 354.

<sup>28</sup> Phillip Ackerman-Lieberman, *The Business of Identity: Jews, Muslims, and Economic Life in Medieval Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2014).

that institutions played a greater role in organizing life in the medieval Islamicate world than was previously assumed.

Recently, Nathan Hofer has encouraged historians of the medieval Near East to define institutions according to their sociological definition: “an established custom or practice” that “provides stability and meaning to human behavior.”<sup>29</sup> This model allowed him to analyze Sufi orders in Ayyubid and Mamluk Egypt with attention to continuities in social practices and understanding, rather than brick-and-mortar structures.

Hofer’s definition of institutions is particularly useful for this dissertation, which follows three different, though overlapping, Jewish “institutions” over a period of 350 years. It allows us to avoid halakhically-informed teleological discussions of “institutional decline.” Instead, this dissertation investigates how the remarkably long-lasting institutions of the yeshiva, the exilarchate, and the *jahbadh* continually adapted and refashioned their relations with the state and with each other to shape and give meaning to medieval Jewish life.

## **Sources and Methodological Approaches**

This dissertation draws on Arabic historical chronicles, letters and letter collections written by Jewish communal elites, and Jewish historical chronicles and other literary works. In what follows, I give an overview of my sources and how I analyze them.

### **Arabic Historical Chronicles**

In this dissertation, I use Arabic historical chronicles to describe the political climate of medieval Baghdad and its implications for Jews. I will rely on Arabic historical chronicles dating

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<sup>29</sup> Nathan Hofer, “Sufism, State, and Society in Ayyubid and Early Mamluk Egypt, 1173-1309” (PhD diss., Emory University, 2011), 21–40.

to the so-called “middle period” of Islamic historiography (mid-10<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries), which represented a new historical consciousness in medieval Islam. Previous historians had used their works to legitimate Abbasid rule. Yet after the fall of the Abbasids in the mid-tenth century, this narrative ceased to be compelling. The next generations of historians (mid-10<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries) instead tried to understand “what had gone wrong.” Rather than using history to legitimate Abbasid rule, they looked to the recent past “as a source of political prudence and moral admonition,” crafting their narratives from accounts that would support their underlying philosophy of history and governance.<sup>30</sup> Even as they looked to the past as a source of moral instruction, the majority of the historians of the middle period were, themselves, affiliated with various forms of political power; the majority of the historians we know about worked as court secretaries. As these authors wrote about the past, they commented on and were embedded in contemporaneous events. They used their narratives to comment covertly (and sometimes, overtly) on the political affairs of their own society.

This dissertation analyzes the discussions of events relating to Jews (and, to a lesser extent, other *dhimmī* populations) in these chronicles. This approach is somewhat problematic, as most Muslim chroniclers were not particularly interested in the internal affairs of non-Muslims, and they did not necessarily know much about these populations. But as Gabrielle Spiegel argues, “Texts both mirror and generate social realities.” The ideology that shaped the structure of medieval historiographical texts also informed the historical events themselves.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, the Muslim chroniclers chose to include events relating to Jews (and other *dhimmī* populations) because of the relevance of these events (or the interpretation of these

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<sup>30</sup> Humphries, *Islamic History*, 130.

<sup>31</sup> Gabrielle Spiegel, “History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages,” *Speculum* 65 (1990), 59-86.



events) for the greater point that they were making about good governance. That is precisely what makes these chronicles so useful for my dissertation. By identifying the significance of these accounts for the internal logic of the texts and the political claims of the authors, I will be able to see how actions relating to *dhimmīs* and Jewish government officials in particular were informed by and informed questions of Islamic political authority and power.

### Jewish Letters, Letter Collections, and Responsa from the Cairo Geniza

This dissertation primarily analyzes letters composed by Jews affiliated with the Babylonian yeshivot. Some of these letters dealt with the transportation of funds or responsa to or from the yeshivot, or various conflicts among the leaders of the yeshivot. Others impart religious teachings and were intended to be read aloud at synagogues in Iraq, Egypt and throughout the Mediterranean.

This corpus represents only a small percentage of the writings of the Jewish community of medieval Baghdad as a whole: those materials which passed through Cairo and were deposited in the Cairo Geniza.<sup>32</sup> As a result, there are significant chronological and geographical gaps in our source base. For example, we have almost no documentation from the Seljuq Era in Baghdad (mid-11<sup>th</sup> through mid-12<sup>th</sup> century) even though other literary and documentary evidence indicates that the yeshivot continued to operate during this time.<sup>33</sup> Even during the well-

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<sup>32</sup> On the “life-cycle” of medieval Arabic documents, see Tamer El-Leithy, “Living Documents, Dying Archives: Towards a Historical Anthropology of Medieval Arabic Archives” *al-Qanṭara* 32 (2011): 389-434.

<sup>33</sup> For the Seljuq era in Baghdad (1055-1157), there are no extant original letters, although 8 original letters that attest to the continued existence of the yeshivot, or otherwise discuss affairs in Baghdad during this time. The Jewish authorities in Baghdad continued to wield influence outside of the city proper. For example, the Nagid of Aden Maḍmūn b. Ḥasan-Japheth (c. 1140) received a title from the Babylonian exilarch in Baghdad, and he sent gifts to the yeshivot in both Baghdad and Palestine. See Mordechai Friedman, S.D. Goitein, *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 37ff. and idem, *India Book Vol. 2: Maḍmūn Nagid Ereṣ Teman ve-Saḥar-Hodu* [Heb.] (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2010). For an overview of the other relevant literary and documentary sources for the Babylonian Gaonate and Exilarchate after the death of Ḥayya

documented early 11<sup>th</sup> century, we still know very little about the writings that might have been generated, used, and disposed of in Baghdad or in other parts of Iraq and Persia.

Furthermore, we possess only a small number of “original letters.”<sup>34</sup> The vast majority of the letters that we do possess are copies. Many of these were probably part of larger collections of letters that were collected for either literary or didactic purposes.<sup>35</sup> We do not know which considerations shaped the formation of these collections, nor do we understand how representative they are of the total written output of the yeshivot. In some cases, the letters contained within these collections may never have even been sent in the first place; they may have been composed specifically for inclusion in the collection of letters as an example of a particularly “eloquent” letter. In other cases, a particular letter may have been copied because it had political significance in a different context.<sup>36</sup>

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Gaon, see Jacob Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature* (New York: Ktav, 1972), 202-248 and Moshe Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael* [Hebrew or English], Secs. 261-268.

<sup>34</sup>So far, I have not located any original letters from Baghdad dating to before the Buyid era. 37 “original” letters written by or to Babylonian geonim or exilarchs in the Buyid period have been identified in the Cairo Geniza: the earliest, Mosseri VIII 479, a letter of Neḥemiah Gaon, dates to 960; the latest, Mosseri I a 5 (L2), a letter of Ḥayya Gaon dates to 1037. Seven additional original letters dating to this time which discuss the transfer of donations to the yeshivot or notable figures in Baghdad. For the later Abbasid Caliphate (1157-1258), I have identified 9 original letters of Samuel b. ‘Alī Gaon (c. 1160-1190), many of which are fragmentary; one letter written by Samuel’s contemporary who describes a visit to his *majlis* (T-S 8J21.22); one original letter of Zekharia b. Berakel Gaon dating to 1191; one letter of Elazar b. Hillel b. Fahd Gaon (MS Adler 4011.1-2) dating to after 1194; and two letters by Jalāl al-Dawla in Fustat that discuss events in Baghdad, dating to 1237 and 1240, respectively (T-S 20.128 & T-S 16.36).

<sup>35</sup> It would appear that the largest letter collection in my corpus, the collection of the letters of Shemu’el b. ‘Alī and his contemporaries (MSS Firkovitch 72 and 105, published by Simḥa Assaf) served a literary/didactic function. The letters are not organized chronologically or by author, and the copyist neglected to copy the parts of letters that were written in Persian, implying that, for the copyist, the information contained in these letters was secondary to their linguistic and literary merits (in Hebrew and Arabic, only). Regarding Buyid letters, Hachmeier posits, “The frequent appearance of the letters in other sources like anthologies and the pre-eminence of the *risāla* as the vehicle par excellence of Arabic artistic prose should be reason enough to argue that the letters were read and studied primarily for their literary merit.” Klaus Hachmeier discusses the application of these concepts to understanding Buyid letter collections: Hachmeier, “Private Letters, Official Correspondence,” 137.

<sup>36</sup> For an evaluation of the genre of “letter collections” in the medieval Latin West, see Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter Collections* (Louvain: Brepols, 1976), 56ff. Klaus Hachmeier, *idem* discusses the application of these concepts to understanding Buyid letter collections.

The issue is compounded when analyzing Babylonian rabbinic responsa, answers to halakhic questions posed by Jewish communities outside of Baghdad. Although some geonic responsa were preserved in the Cairo Geniza, many were copied numerous times and ultimately preserved in books printed in Europe centuries later.<sup>37</sup>

Geonic letters and responsa seldom explicitly refer to specific Muslim rulers or political events. Still, they do give insight into the administration of the yeshivot and their relations with Jews outside of Baghdad. Moreover, medieval letters were not mere repositories of information and historical data. Rather, these letters had ceremonial, diplomatic, and literary value in their social and political context.<sup>38</sup> By analyzing these letters with attention to this context, this dissertation will reveal how the claims to spiritual authority that Jewish leaders made were intimately related to the Abbasid political milieu in which they were asserted.

### Jewish Historical/Halakhic Narratives

This dissertation also makes use of medieval Jewish historical, halakhic, and travel narratives. Medieval Islamicate societies, like those of medieval Christendom, were traditional societies that depended on the past for legitimation.<sup>39</sup> Although Islamicate Jews did not develop a robust historiographical tradition, their institutions derived authority through historical claims.

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<sup>37</sup> For an overview of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century historiography on the geonic period, see Gerson D. Cohen, “The Reconstruction of Gaonic History,” in Jacob Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature* (Jerusalem: Ktav, 1972), xiii-xcix. As Cohen argues, although many of the sources relating to the Babylonian geonim have been published and given “ cursory” analysis, they have not yet been properly historicized: “there is a mine of material, Jewish as well as Muslim, waiting for the historian to elucidate the activities of the geonim in the context of the society of their day” (lxxii).

<sup>38</sup> See Klaus Hachmeier, “Private Letters, Official Correspondence: Buyid Inshā’ as a Historical Source,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 13:2 (2002), 125-154. On geniza letters as substitute for the physical presence of their authors, and the practice of reading letters aloud, see Arnold Franklin, “More than words on a Page: Letters as Substitutes for an Absent Writer,” in *Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Medieval and Early Modern Times* (Boston: Brill, 2014), 287-305.

<sup>39</sup> On this phenomenon in Latin Europe, see Gabrielle Spiegel, “Political Utility in Medieval Historiography: A Sketch,” *History and Theory* 14 (1975), 314-325.

Close-readings of medieval Jewish historical/halakhic narratives with attention to the political context in which they were composed give further insight into the claims to authority advanced by Jewish leaders in Baghdad and throughout the Mediterranean at different times and in different political contexts.

Texts composed by Jews affiliated with the yeshivot in Baghdad, such as Nathan Ha-Bavli's Judeo-Arabic *Akhhār Baghdad*<sup>40</sup> (c. 956) and the Aramaic Circular Letter of Sherira Gaon (a responsum written in response to a query by Nissim b. Yaacov of Qayrawan) both provide invaluable information on Jewish communal authorities in Baghdad in the late 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries and how they characterized their relationship with the Abbasid state.

I also draw on medieval Jewish travel literature. Ovadaya the Proselyte,<sup>41</sup> Petaḥya of Regensburg<sup>42</sup>, and Benjamin of Tudela<sup>43</sup> all visited Baghdad in the twelfth century. They described their experiences in the city and recorded stories that they heard about notable episodes in the history of the Baghdad Jewish community. Although these texts contain fictional elements and were intended for a Jewish readership in Europe, they provide insight into the kinds of narratives that Baghdad's elite Jews expressed about themselves to foreign visitors.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, this dissertation examines historic/halakhic narratives composed by rabbinic elites outside of Baghdad, such as Abraham ibn Dawud's *Book of Tradition* and Maimonides' Introduction to the *Mishneh Torah*. Analyzing these sources in dialogue with contemporaneous

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<sup>40</sup> Menaḥem Ben Sasson, "The Structure, Goals, and Content of the Story of Nathan ha-Babli," in *Culture and Society in Medieval Jewry: Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson*, ed. M. Ben-Sasson, R. Bonfil, and J. Hacker (Jerusalem: Merkaz Shazar, 1989), pp. 137–196 [Hebrew].

<sup>41</sup> Norman Golb, "The Autograph Memoirs of Obadiah the Proselyte," in *Studies in Geniza and Sephardi Heritage Presented to Shelomo Dov Goitein*, ed. Sh. Morag et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1981), 77–107 [Hebrew].

<sup>42</sup> Abraham David, "Sibbu Rabbi Petaḥya me-Regensburg be-Nusah Ḥadash," *Qobes 'al Yad*, n.s. 13 (1996): 237–269.

<sup>43</sup> Michael A. Signer, M.N. Adler, *The itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Travels in the Middle Ages* (Malibu: J. Simon, 1983).

<sup>44</sup> Martin Jacobs, *Reorienting the East: Jewish Travelers to the Medieval Muslim World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

Jewish travel narratives and geniza material further demonstrates how rabbinic claims to halakhic and spiritual authority differed depending on the political circumstances in which they were composed.

## **Outline of Chapters**

The dissertation is structured chronologically, beginning in 908 with the first references to high-level Jewish court bankers in Arabic sources and ending right before the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 1258. Each chapter examines developments in Jewish communal and political life under each successive Islamic regime in Baghdad.

Chapter 1, “‘Every Desire that you have from the Kingdom’: Jewish Politics in the Late Abbasid Caliphate, 908-942,” examines Jewish political culture in the first half of the tenth century, during the apotheosis of the Abbasid Caliphate. It begins with an explanation of the Abbasid political developments that fostered the rise of a new group of Jewish financial administrators within the Abbasid governing bureaucracy. Next, it considers how these Jewish government officials made alliances with Jewish communal officials, raising their prestige within the Jewish community while, at the same time, challenging the traditional structure of Jewish communal authority. Then, it examines the ways in which Jewish leaders in the early tenth century used their close relations with the Abbasid state to project their own authority.

Chapter 2, “‘We must go out to them ourselves’: The Babylonian Yeshivot and the Buyid State, 933-1028,” seeks to understand how the yeshivot continued to survive—and thrive—without access to the same forms of political power that they had enjoyed in the past. It begins by examining how the breakdown of the centralized Abbasid administration and the rise of the Buyids impacted the status of Jewish court bankers in Buyid territory. Then, it considers how

this environment affected the operations of the yeshivot and their ability to use their connection to centralized political power to perform favors for their followers. The final section explores how these changes in political organization forced Jewish leaders to re-conceptualize their own relationship to the state and project their authority in a new way.

Chapter 3, “‘Suppose the Jew is dead’: Jews and the ‘Sunni Revival’ in Seljuq Baghdad, 1037-1146,” examines the effect of Seljuq rule and a new Sunni ascendancy on the Jews of Iraq. Part I explores the social and political dynamics of Baghdad during this period, examining the debates and contradictions surrounding the place of non-Muslims in a majority-Sunni society and government. Part II explores how Jewish communal leaders in Baghdad tried to navigate this new political context and advance their own interests and those of their co-religionists before the state. Part III uses the fragmentary surviving Jewish sources to suggest how these changes created a crisis of ideals in the Jewish community, forcing them to reevaluate their own relationship with the state once more.

Chapter 4, “‘None of the concerns that require a king?’ Jewish Political Realignment in the Independent Caliphate, 1161-1258,” considers the impact of efforts toward administrative centralization on Jews during the final years of the Abbasid Caliphate. I argue that these developments might have led to the granting of investiture to the geonim, and increased temporarily the status and prestige of the various Jewish officials at the Abbasid court. Next, I explore the impact of these political and administrative changes on the operations of the Jewish community, itself. I also consider the implications of this new arrangement on the way in which the geonim and the exilarch in Baghdad promoted their authority in relation to each other. The chapter concludes by considering how the geonim and their allies, now officially part of Abbasid

administration, characterized their relationship to the Abbasid state during the final years of the caliphate.

Chapter 5, “‘No Need of Babylonia’? The Construction of Rabbinic Authority in the Eleventh and Twelfth Century Mediterranean,” investigates how Jewish communities in the Mediterranean and in Europe related to and characterized the Babylonian yeshivot during the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, after the “classical geonic era.” Part I argues that economic and geopolitical developments in the middle of the eleventh century diminished long-distance connections between Egyptian and Babylonian Jews, thereby leading some Mediterranean Jewish leaders to claim *halakhic* authority without receiving titles from the Babylonian yeshivot, even as the Babylonian yeshivot continued to command the loyalties of some Jews. Part II contends that the renewal of trans-Mediterranean connections with Iraq in the middle of the twelfth century catalyzed a *halakhic* and historiographic tradition that either explained the transfer of rabbinic authority to the west or denied the authority of Babylonia altogether. Part III argues that these challenges led rabbinic leaders in Babylonia to emphasize the *halakhic* significance of their location in Babylonia itself, and that many Jews worldwide continued to accept and promote these claims to Babylonian halakhic supremacy.

## Chapter 1: “Every Desire that you have from the Kingdom”: Jewish Politics in the Late Abbasid Caliphate, 908-942

In 928, Sa‘adya b. Yosef al-Fayyūmi ascended to the gaonate of the Yeshiva of Sura (Mata Maḥsiya) in Baghdad. As one of his first acts in office, he composed a missive to Jewish communities residing abroad in Fustat, Egypt on behalf of the yeshiva. In the letter, he emphasized the yeshiva’s religious authority and its responsibility to promulgate Jewish law by declaring, “We are commanded to write to you letters of warnings and admonishments to arouse your hearts and to awaken your passing thoughts to the commandments of the Lord our God.”<sup>1</sup> In this way, Sa‘adya followed in the tradition of previous geonim who tried to promote proper observance of Jewish law through the dissemination of halakhic writings among their followers. But he also differed from his predecessors in his understanding of the function of the yeshiva. For Sa‘adya, the yeshiva was not only a center of religious authority, but also a conduit to political power with direct links to state officials, a position that he made explicit at the end of his letter:

And every desire and request that you have from the kingdom inform us for then we will direct [them] to the masters of the important houses that are in Baghdad, that we sit between them, the sons of Mar Neṭira and the sons of Mar Aharon ... and thus they will sit for you in front of the king (caliph).<sup>2</sup>

In this regard, Sa‘adya was not unique; nearly every gaon or exilarch in the early tenth century eagerly cultivated relationships with the Abbasid state.

On the one hand, these close ties between Jewish communal leaders and state officials are indicative of Jewish integration into mainstream Abbasid political culture, a situation reflected in

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<sup>1</sup> Bodl. MS Heb.c.13.22. Moshe Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael* [Hebrew], 4 vols. (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, the Ministry of Defense, and the Bialik Institute, 1997), doc. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



contemporaneous Jewish and Muslim sources. Changes in Abbasid political life in the early tenth century gave Jews more access to state power than ever before. In particular, wealthy Jewish merchants came to play prominent roles in the financial administration of the caliphate.<sup>3</sup> Urban Jews began to communicate overwhelmingly in Arabic, the language of the Islamic government, rather than their ancestral Aramaic.<sup>4</sup> Jewish communal officials relied on their ties to the government to enforce their rulings.

On the other hand, the ease with which Sa'adya and his contemporaries invoked their relations with the state is surprising. The geonim inherited a rabbinic legal tradition that, at best, was skeptical of relations with non-Jewish authorities. In Late Antiquity, the rabbis of the Talmud criticized the exilarch for his involvement in politics. Indeed, they derived their own authority from their separation from such Jewish figures more associated with state power as the exilarch.<sup>5</sup> Earlier geonim, living a century before Sa'adya, included clauses in their responsa asking that God protect their followers from "evil rule," indicating a rather pessimistic view of gentile authorities.<sup>6</sup> Such later Jewish sources as Sherira Gaon's letter (late-tenth century) also advanced this topos by arguing that the exilarchs were corrupted through their connection to secular power.

Why then were Jewish communal leaders in the early tenth-century more open to involvement with the state than their forebears and their successors, and what practical implications did this have for Jewish political life? This chapter examines Jewish political culture in the first half of the tenth century, during the apotheosis of the Abbasid caliphate. It

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Fischel, *Jews in the Economic and Political Life of Medieval Islam* (New York: Ktav, 1969), 1-44.

<sup>4</sup> On the transition from Aramaic to Arabic and Hebrew among tenth-century Jews, see Rina Drory, *Models and Contacts: Arabic Literature and Its Impact on Medieval Jewish Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> See Geoffrey Herman, *A Prince Without a Kingdom: The Exilarch in the Sasanian Era* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), esp. 181-190 and 217-238.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., *Seder Rav 'Amram Gaon* (Jerusalem: 1912), 1.

begins with an explanation of the political developments that fostered the rise of a new group of Jewish financial administrators within the Abbasid governing bureaucracy. Next, it considers how these Jewish government officials made alliances with Jewish communal officials, raising their prestige within the Jewish community while, at the same time, challenging the traditional structure of Jewish communal authority. Then, it examines the ways in which Jewish leaders in the early tenth century used their close relations with the Abbasid state to project their own authority.

### **Part I: Tenth Century Political Developments and the Rise of the *Jahbadhs***

At the beginning of the tenth century, the Abbasid Caliphate experienced a temporary revival. The caliph, who had been exiled to Samarra and effectively stripped of his power by the army, returned to Baghdad in 892 and built a new, lavish palace complex. Now in command of the army, he squelched a revolt in southern Iraq and successfully repelled Bedouin invaders. He also restored direct authority in Egypt and Syria and tribute relations with proxy dynasties in Persia.<sup>7</sup> The caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 908-932) greatly expanded and centralized the Abbasid bureaucracy. Whereas under the early Abbasids, the caliph took an active role in governing, personally receiving petitions from his subjects and meeting with high-ranking officials, by the tenth century, the caliph had retreated into the palace and stopped meeting with the heads of various departments himself. Viziers managed his administration. As Maaïke van Berkel explains, the vizier acted as a “Janus figure”: he functioned as both a personal servant to the caliph and as a political leader.<sup>8</sup> Court chroniclers described the position of vizier as precarious.

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<sup>7</sup> Maaïke van Berkel, Nadia Maria El Ceikh, Hugh Kennedy, and Letizia Osti, *Crisis and Continuity in the Abbasid Court: Formal and Informal Politics in the Caliphate of Al-Muqtadir (295-320/908-32)* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 13-48.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

The vizier needed to do everything in his power to maintain the favor of the caliph since the caliph could dismiss him and confiscate all of his property at any time for any reason. The moment that a vizier rose to great power, his political rivals conspired against him to discredit him in the eyes of the caliph; often, a once-powerful vizier found himself destitute.

High-level officials thus needed places to safeguard and conceal their own assets, many of which were probably obtained through less-than-legal means—a sort of insurance policy—in case they lost favor with the caliph and he seized their property.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the expansion of the empire and the bureaucracy required a more sophisticated system of currency regulation, money transport, and credit.<sup>10</sup> Many different coins of many different values circulated throughout the empire, and the state needed to convert them to the same currency when they were deposited in centralized treasuries. Moreover, the caliph's treasury was seldom sufficient to cover all of the expenses of governing the empire, so viziers often needed to procure large sums of money in order to pay provincial administrators and launch military campaigns.

These needs led to the development of a new position in the Abbasid bureaucracy: the *jahbadh* (collector or court banker). *Jahbadhs* presided over large networks of traders and bankers throughout the empire, and, within these networks, they used letters of credit to facilitate the transport of large amounts of capital. They granted loans to state officials: when the state needed an advance on money, a vizier would go to a *jahbadh* and demand that he loan him the

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<sup>9</sup> According to Arabic chroniclers, embezzlement of state funds was a widespread practice among Abbasid officials, and they assumed that most officials possessed illegal monies. The sources praised those viziers who pursued corrupt officials. An individual found guilty of embezzlement was stripped of his position, imprisoned, and forced to surrender his assets. Still, the act of embezzlement did not preclude him from holding a high-level position at court in the future, and many of the embezzlement trials were probably politically motivated. See Maaïke Van Berkel, "Embezzlement and Reimbursement: Disciplining Officials in Abbāsīd Baghdad (8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D.)," *International Journal of Public Administration* 34, no. 11 (2011): 712-719.

<sup>10</sup> Fischel, *Jews in the Economic and Political Life*, 4.

money.<sup>11</sup> Viziers also deposited some of their assets with *jahbadhs*, and they relied on the *jahbadhs* to conceal these funds from the state to the extent of their ability. In 918, the budget of the caliphate included a *māl al-jahābadha*, a fee paid to the *jahbadhs* in exchange for their services. Contemporaneous sources attest to a *dīwān al-jahābadha*, or office of the *jahbadhs*, from 928 onwards.<sup>12</sup>

The position of *jahbadh* was not restricted by religion, and, according to Arabic chroniclers, Muslims, Christians, and Jews all served as *jahbadhs*. Although Christians and Muslims had long played prominent roles in the Abbasid bureaucracy, the participation of Jews in this manner was unprecedented.<sup>13</sup> Yet by the early tenth century, some Jews presided over powerful long-distance trade networks with access to large amounts of capital, positioning themselves to serve as *jahbadhs*. The officials Sa‘adya mentioned in his letter—“the sons of Mar Neṭira and the sons of Mar Aharon”—were members of two prominent Jewish *jahbadh* families explicitly referred to in Arabic sources.<sup>14</sup> According to the *Book of Viziers*, a list of forms of address for the officials of Al-Muqtadir’s court, their fathers, Yūsuf b. Fīnhās and Aharon b. ‘Amrām, received the honorary title *Jahābadha al-Ḥaḍra*, “the *jahbadhs* of the caliph.” Only one other *jahbadh*, a Christian, received this title.<sup>15</sup>

*Jahbadhs* occupied a unique space within the Abbasid bureaucracy. They did not serve as members of the caliph’s household, and I am not aware of a single account of a meeting between

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<sup>11</sup> Contemporaneous Arabic chroniclers described the loan agreements in rather one-sided terms. A vizier typically ordered, rather than requested, a *jahbadh* to issue him a loan. Sometimes the *jahbadh* refused, but most often he eventually agreed to the terms imposed on him. For examples of loan agreements between Jewish *jahbadhs* and Muslim viziers, see the sources cited by Fischel, *Jews in the Economic and Political Life*, 21-25.

<sup>12</sup> Fischel, *Jews in the Economic and Political Life*, 4-5.

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of Christians employed in the Abbasid bureaucracy, see Van Berkel et al., *Crisis and Continuity in the Abbasid Court*, 87-110.

<sup>14</sup> Fischel, *Jews in the Economic and Political Life*, 34-44.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

a *jahbadh* and the caliph al-Muqtadir himself.<sup>16</sup> Most likely, *jahbadhs* were not ranked high enough to be granted an audience with the caliph in his inner chamber.<sup>17</sup> Instead, they were most closely bound to viziers through ties of reciprocity: *jahbadhs* depended on the viziers to deposit money with them and to pay back loans with interest, while viziers depended on *jahbadhs* to both shield their personal assets from the state and grant them substantial loans whenever the state required.<sup>18</sup>

Most of our information on Jewish *jahbadhs* comes from the works of al-Tanūkhī (c. 971), a judge in Baghdad who recorded a large collection of stories about courtly life that he claimed to have heard directly from “learned, literary, and otherwise excellent sheikhs.”<sup>19</sup> He intended the work to serve as a veiled critique of the corruption of the society in which he lived, and he used narratives about court bureaucrats from a few decades earlier to impart moral lessons to his readers.

According to al-Tanūkhī, the position of *jahbadh* at court was not tied to the fate of individual viziers. The caliph al-Muqtadir went through fifteen viziers throughout his twenty-five year reign, but his two Jewish *jahbadhs*, Yūsuf b. Fīnḥās and Hārūn<sup>20</sup> b. ‘Amrām, “were never dismissed until their death.” According al-Tanūkhī, this was because their dismissal could result in the collapse of the caliphate’s financial system:

The Caliph [al-Muqtadir] did not want to dismiss them in order to uphold the dignity of the office of the *jahbadh* in the eyes of the merchants so that the merchants might be ready to lend their money through the *jahbadh* in necessary. Were a *jahbadh* to be dismissed and another appointed in his place with whom the

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<sup>16</sup> A Judeo-Arabic history of the Neṭira family refers to a meeting between Neṭira and the caliph, but this account is almost certainly legendary. See Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 11.

<sup>17</sup> On the link between the physical shape of the Abbasid palace and access to the caliph, see Lestizia Osti, “Abbasid Intrigues: Competing for Influence at the Caliph’s Court,” *Al-Masaq* 20, no.1 (2008): 5-15.

<sup>18</sup> Most viziers had their own personal money managers, and they tried to shield their assets by not recording them in books. Fischel, *Jews in the Economic and Political Life*, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Tanūkhī, I, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Arabic equivalent of the Hebrew Aharon.

merchants had not yet had any dealings the business of the caliph would come to a standstill.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, it was the *jahbadhs*' bonds of trust and loyalty with many different merchants throughout (and possibly even outside of) the caliphate that made them so valuable to the Abbasid administration. These professional networks lasted across generations. Sa'adya's letter indicates that the sons and grandsons of these two officials (the sons of Neṭira and the sons of Aharon b. 'Amram) presided over the same mercantile networks after their fathers' deaths and maintained their privileged positions in Abbasid administration. Although al-Tanūkhī explicitly identified the *jahbadhs*' religious status, he did not consider this religious identification particularly relevant to their actions. Instead, he characterized the Jewish *jahbadhs* as savvy, prudent officials who successfully maintained alliances with rival officials. One of the figures that he discussed was none other than the *Jahbadh* Saḥl b. Naẓīr, known in Jewish sources as Saḥl b. Neṭira, and one of the sons of Neṭira mentioned in Sa'adya's letter.

According to al-Tanūkhī, after the vizier 'Ubayd-allāh b. Sulayman was deposed by the caliph and imprisoned, the Jewish *Jahbadh* Saḥl b. Naẓīr had an inkling that the vizier would be promoted again. He sent a hundred dinars to the family of the disgraced vizier every month while he was in prison. Saḥl's prediction came true: Ubayd-allāh was released from prison and elevated to the vizierate once more. Ubayd-allāh arrested the *kātib* Jarādah and seized his money (possibly in retaliation for Jarādah's role in his previous misfortunes). Jarādah, however, had done Saḥl "many a kindness" in the past, so he again sent one hundred dinars to the discredited vizier's family every month while he was in prison. When the vizier found out that Saḥl was

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<sup>21</sup> Al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār al-Muḥādara* Vol. II, ed. D.S. Margoliouth (Damascus: 1930), 85. The translation is found in Fischel, *Jews in the Economic and Political Life*, 28.

sending money to Jarādah's family, he was incensed. In response, Sahl gingerly reminded the vizier of his service to him when he was in the same position:

O Vizier, I have not been doing this, neither would I venture on such a proceeding. The man who has been doing this is a man who transmitted a hundred dinars monthly to [your family] in recognition of the benefits which [you] had conferred upon him; and in recognition of benefits conferred on him by Jarādah has been transmitting to Jarādah's family the same amounts as he formerly sent to [your family].<sup>22</sup>

The vizier then "blushed, hung his head, and kept silence for a time; presently his face began to stream with perspiration." Sahl, at first, regretted having spoken and thought that he would surely be arrested. Instead, the vizier "raised his head, and said, 'You have done well Sahl.'"<sup>23</sup> In relating this anecdote, Al-Tanūkhī praises Sahl's actions. Sahl was not duplicitous; rather, he was a savvy, prudent, and generous official, a valuable ally who performed favors for those who performed favors for him. His ability to remain "above the fray" while maintaining multiple, overlapping alliances marked a successful *jahbadh*.

Jewish texts characterized *jahbadhs* in much the same way. A Judeo-Arabic text in honor of the Neṭira family from the middle of the tenth century, preserved in the Cairo Geniza, celebrated Sahl's "skill in Arabic script and excellence at the art of letter writing (*tarsīl*)," talents that would have been essential for navigating Abbasid political life. The documents went on to extoll Sahl as a social networker who cultivated relationships with many rival officials at court:

Every day [Sahl] rides to the caliph's palace. He does not take an income from the caliph, but rather he pays him 500 *mithqāl* each year, and he distributes this amount to the viziers of the sultan. He did not confiscate a single [*mithqāl*] from this sum [for himself]. ... He also performs acts of kindness for the gentiles, through charity [*ṣadāqa*] and gifts. He buys around 500 garments, more or less, and disperses them among the gentiles, and he also sends money to Kufa, distributing it to the 'Alids and the Hashemites. In doing this, he followed after the model of his father.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Translated by D. S. Margoliouth, *The Table-Talk of a Mesopotamian Judge* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1922).

<sup>23</sup> Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 11.

Accepting income from the state would have put Sahl at risk of depending upon a single political figure at court whom, should the caliph become angry with him, would have meant his ruin. At the same time, an official might at some point accuse him of taking more money than he was entitled to, leading to his downfall. Giving money to the caliph and all of his viziers would ensure that no one conspired against him. By donating to the ‘Alids and the Hashemites, many of whom served as intercessors between the government and local officials, Sahl ingratiated himself with local elites throughout Abbasid territory. Most Abbasid viziers also made sure to give money to the ‘Alids.<sup>25</sup> In this way, Sahl curried favor with diverse forms of political power throughout the region and positioned himself as a successful *jahbadh*.

### *The Jahbadhs as Dhimmīs*

Although the position of *jahbadh* was not restricted to any single religious group, the majority of known *jahbadhs* from the first half of the tenth century appear to have been non-Muslim (*dhimmīs*).<sup>26</sup> Indeed, wealthy *dhimmīs* were well-situated to become successful *jahbadhs*, and structural features of *dhimmī* communities likely helped to facilitate their rise. Because *jahbadhs* rose to prominence in the Abbasid bureaucracy by safeguarding the assets of viziers and concealing them from other state officials, it was in a vizier’s interest to entrust his assets to someone who was part of a different community with fewer ties to his own. As a result,

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<sup>25</sup> M. A. Pomerantz, “Licit Magic and Divine Grace: The Life and Letters of al-Ṣāḥib Ibn ‘Abbād (d. 385/995),” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago: 2010), 126.

<sup>26</sup> Of the ten *jahbadhs* active in the first half of the tenth century that Fischel identified, four have discernably Jewish names: Hārūn b. ‘Imrān, Yūsuf b. Fīnḥās, Sahl b. Naẓīr, and Isrā’īl b. Ṣalīḥ. Three have explicitly Christian names: Ibrāhīm b. Yūḥannā, Zakariyyā b. Yūḥannā, Nikolas b. Andūna, and Merkūr b. Shanūda, and another, Ibrāhīm b. Ayyūb, the head of the *dīwān al-jahbadha* is explicitly identified as a Christian. It is unclear whether *Jahbadh* Ibrāhīm b. Aḥmad b. Idrīs was Muslim. Fischel, *Jews in the Economic and Political Life*, 5.



fewer individuals affiliated with a vizier's Muslim enemies would have been able to inform on him to the state or testify about his assets.

But what if a *dhimmī jahbadh* violated his agreement with a vizier whose money he was safeguarding? Because the viziers needed to hide their assets from the state, they could not appeal to Muslim courts to rectify the situation. Instead, as this section will demonstrate, Muslim viziers appealed to *dhimmī* communal officials, compelling them to excommunicate (or threaten to excommunicate) the *jahbadh* in question unless he abided by the agreement.<sup>27</sup>

According to Jewish sources, Muslim officials often pressured *dhimmī* communal officials to excommunicate their coreligionists. The geonim referred to this possibility in multiple legal rulings (*responsa*) and reluctantly ruled that it was impossible to refuse to issue a ban of excommunication in response to a demand from a non-Jewish official:

[Regarding] a king or authority or head of customs who orders a community (*qahal*) to issue a ban of excommunication for his needs and belongings, and desires to punish or take money from a Jew, and it is impossible not to issue the ban of excommunication because of force. This ban that is issued is not total, and there is no meaning to it.<sup>28</sup>

The responsum tried to create a loophole to avoid imposing an actual ban by having Jewish leaders refrain from pronouncing the exact rabbinic legal formula of excommunication. Still, this responsum and others like it indicate that this practice was far from uncommon.

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<sup>27</sup> In this way, Jewish communal institutions may have functioned as enforcement mechanisms within an underground economy for Muslim officials. There is a large literature on alternative forms of governance for individuals without access to effective government institutions, including organized crime and prison gangs. See, e.g., David Skarbek, "Prison Gangs, Norms, and Organizations," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 82, no.1 (2012): 702-716 and the sources cited therein.

<sup>28</sup> Most *responsa* from before the eleventh century were transmitted anonymously, and thus it is difficult to date them with any certainty. Still, I suggest that, even if these *responsa* were written before the tenth century, the individuals that this chapter is dealing with understood these *responsa* as part of their inherited tradition. All of the *responsa* cited in this dissertation were accessed through the Bar Ilan Responsa Project Online. תשובות הגאונים - שער י. תשובה סימן קצ"ה; an almost identical responsum is found in Teshuvot Ha-Geonim Ha-Hadashot-Amnoel, #86.

Al-Tanūkhī described the act of excommunicating (or threatening to excommunicate) *dhimmī* officials as a clever, effective method of governing. He illustrated its power through an anecdote in his *Nishwār al-Muhādhara* attributed to the *qādī*, Abū Bakr Muhammad b. ‘Abd-allāh. According to Abū Bakr, during the vizierate of ‘Alī b. ‘Isā, two new Byzantine emperors ascended to the throne and began to oppress Muslim prisoners of war and force them to convert to Christianity. This “deeply distressed” the vizier, and he was at a loss for what to do: “This is not a matter with which I can deal, for it is not within the competence of our sultan nor of the caliph, neither would they obey me. Otherwise I should have laid out money in equipping a force with all earnest for the invasion of Constantinople!” he exclaimed to the *qādī*.<sup>29</sup> The *qādī*, however, had an ingenious plan. He advised the vizier:

The Christians have a potentate in Antioch who is called Patriarch and another in Jerusalem called Catholicos. The authority of these two extends over the whole Byzantine Empire, so that at times they have excommunicated the Emperor himself or released him from excommunication, and these sentences have been recognized. The Byzantines hold that disobedience to these two potentates is heresy and that no Emperor can be properly installed in the Byzantine capital without their approval, without his paying homage to them and being promoted by them. Now the two cities are within our empire and these persons are under our protection. The viziers should write to the governors of the cities to summon them and inform them of the treatment accorded to the captives, which is contrary to their doctrines, and that if a stop be not put to it they (the Patriarch and the Catholicos) will be held responsible. Let him then see what answer he will receive.

The vizier did this, and the Patriarch and the Catholicos wrote a letter to the emperors threatening to excommunicate them unless they improved the prisoners’ treatment:

By your treatment of the captives you have violated the Christian religion. You have no right to treat them thus, seeing that such conduct is contrary to the precepts of Christ. ... Either you shall put a stop to this treatment and instead treat them with kindness and cease demanding that they should become Christian, or we from our two thrones shall curse and excommunicate you.

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<sup>29</sup> The translator suggested that this was a manuscript error, since these events took place before there was a separate sultan and caliph in Baghdad.

The threat had the desired effect. A messenger reported that the Byzantines had stopped oppressing the Muslim prisoners. When the prisoners heard that the vizier was responsible for alleviating their plight, “they proceeded to lavish blessings” on him.<sup>30</sup>

The anecdote is almost certainly fictional. There is no additional record of this event, and the story raises questions. Why did the vizier assume that the caliph would not be capable of or interested in assisting the prisoners? After all, as commander of the faithful, the caliph would have had a religious obligation to protect his fellow Muslims from harm at the hands of a foreign power. Indeed, at the end of the story, the *qāḍī* praised the vizier for his assistance, telling him that, because of his good deed in helping the prisoners, he “will secure [God’s] reward in the future life.” Why would the caliph not have wanted to advance his own virtue in relation to his subjects by improving their conditions in captivity?

The vizier’s inability or refusal to involve the caliph suggests that the vizier was trying to keep a secret from him—and that the story was never actually about Muslim prisoners of war. Throughout his writings, al-Tanūkhī used anecdotes from the past in order to teach his contemporaries how to be successful and prudent politicians. This particular story illustrated the effectiveness of appealing to *dhimmī* legal authorities when one needed to conceal one’s activities or financial holdings. In this narrative, however, a Muslim vizier’s appeal to a *dhimmī* official was not a duplicitous scheme for concealing his activities from the state. It was a way for him to fulfill his religious obligations.

### *The Jahbadhs as Jews*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Table-Talk I, 32-34. (30-33).

<sup>31</sup> This section focuses specifically on Jewish legal texts, and it extrapolates about the writing system of Jews based on documents from the Cairo Geniza. It is possible that Christians in Iraq would also have shared these characteristics.

As members of a *dhimmī* community with its own language and legal system, Jews were uniquely well-positioned to assist viziers in concealing assets from the authorities. For one thing, Jewish merchants almost certainly kept records of their transactions in Hebrew letters.<sup>32</sup> When a vizier was dismissed from service, the state confiscated all of his documents in order to locate and seize all his assets.<sup>33</sup> A Muslim official would not have been able to read records of assets kept by Jews. He would have had to call on a Jew to interpret the documents and testify regarding the amount of money specified in them.

Jewish law, however, strongly prohibited informing on one's fellow Jew for the benefit of a non-Jew. According to the Talmud, an informer (*moser*) should be put to death, and he will suffer for his crime for eternity. This principle applied, even when the individual in question had informed on a Jewish "robber" who was, in fact, guilty. Although the geonim did not officially advocate the death penalty for informers (under Abbasid rule *dhimmīs* did not have the power to carry out capital punishment), they strongly condemned the act and openly discouraged it.

One responsum tried to discourage the act of informing by warning that someone who informs on his fellow Jew to the authorities with the result of excommunication of the individual should not expect favors from the community in the future. It cautions that "there is no mercy for one who expels and bans and requests from us to secure for him an act of kindness and to bless him. He stands in his faith and mercy on his heirs, and no man will write about him among the faithful of the land."<sup>34</sup> Other responsa encourage an informer's blood relatives to kill

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<sup>32</sup> Fischel thought that this was a possibility, but it seems particularly likely since so many of these Jews were in the process of concealing Muslim assets and most viziers did not keep written records of their financial holdings. Moreover, Geniza evidence indicates that Jewish merchants wrote primarily in Judeo-Arabic, and it is likely that many would not have been able to write in Arabic letters.

<sup>33</sup> See Van Berkel, "Embezzlement and Reimbursement;" *Idem.*, "The Vizier and the Harem Stewardess: Mediation in a Discharge Case at the court of Al-Muqtadir," *Abbasid Studies II*, ed. John Nawas (Leuven: Orientalia Lovaniensia Analekta, 2010), 303-318.

<sup>34</sup> תשובות הגאונים - שער תשובה סימן קצה

him.<sup>35</sup> The geonim also provided a recourse for an individual who had been reported to the authorities: he was entitled to compensation for the property damage that he suffered, and he could obtain a letter from the Jewish court to present to the Islamic court in case the matter arose again.<sup>36</sup>

Many geonic responsa address scenarios in which governmental authorities compelled a Jew to testify under oath regarding “stolen” money that had been deposited with a Jew, very likely in the context of disciplinary procedures against Abbasid viziers. For example, one community asked,

An oath that a king or authority or customs official requires is forbidden for a Jew to swear, but [what about the case of] a king who demands money from a Jew that had been stolen, and wants to know where this individual or his money is, where it was deposited, or who deposited it with him?

The question itself attests to Jews sometimes holding possession of money that was considered “stolen” and officials trying to track down this money in order to confiscate it. The gaon responded forcefully, declaring both that the act of testifying was in violation of Jewish law and that one who testified should be excommunicated:

Do not say to the king, “[The money] is this amount.” [The one who testifies] will be excommunicated to the king, and the community will answer amen.<sup>37</sup> And do not deliver a Jew or his money that came from a robber or a thief. And also R. Nahshon says, ‘It is forbidden for a community to receive charity (*ṣedaqa*) from a non-Jew, and one who receives money from him is not considered to be marked for eternal blessing.’<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> תשובות הגאונים - גאונים קדמונים סימן ק

<sup>36</sup> Teshuvot Hageonim, Koronel #333

<sup>37</sup> למלך. The editor interpreted *melekh* (king) here as referring to the head of the yeshiva, and thus the sentence would read “he will be excommunicated by the head of the yeshiva.” Yet in the same sentence, the term *melekh* is used only to refer to a gentile king. I suggest, rather, that the term should be translated as “to the king,” meaning that the informer will be excommunicated from the Jewish community and would have to depend on the protection of the gentile authorities. Cf. the Chronicle of Natan ha-Bavli, in which the exilarch Uqba is banned from Baghdad, and warned that if he returned, “Islam would be incumbent upon him.”

<sup>38</sup> Teshuvot Hageonim, Koronel, #26

Additionally, according to this gaon, any Jew who received money from a non-Jew, probably in this case referring to bribe money, would suffer divine punishment.

The extent to which Jews actually obeyed geonic rulings is unclear. Undoubtedly, many openly flouted geonic rulings and informed on Jews to the government. Indeed, it is unlikely that the geonim would have issued so many rulings against the practice of informing if the issue never came up. Still, the responsa indicate that this principle, rooted in the Talmud, were central to Jewish law as medieval Jews would have understood it. A general reluctance to inform on fellow Jews, coupled with communal sanctions against informers, likely helped *jahbadhs* in their roles safeguarding the assets of Muslim viziers.

The *jahbadhs* thus had a vested interest in cultivating relations with the Babylonian geonim in order to ensure that the geonim would protect their interests by imposing sanctions on Jews who informed on them. Muslim viziers would then have been obligated to perform favors for the Jewish *jahbadhs* who protected their property. As the next section argues, the power and prestige of Jewish *jahbadhs* within the Abbasid court buttressed their power and prestige within the Jewish community. Throughout the tenth century, Jewish *jahbadhs* played central roles in Jewish communal politics, functioning as intermediaries between Jewish communal leadership and the Abbasid state.

## **Part II: Jewish *Jahbadhs* as Intercessors between Jews and the State**

Sa 'adya's letter suggests another function for the court bankers: as presenters of petitions from Jews before the government. The caliph al-Muqtadir actively encouraged the submission of petitions in special *Mazālim* courts presided over by viziers. By addressing his subjects' grievances, the caliph promoted his own goodness in relation to corrupt officials. In bringing

petitions before the caliph, Jews demonstrated their loyalty to the caliph in exactly the same way as his other subjects, and the caliph used Jews to exercise his power in much the same way that he used his Muslim subjects. Most Jews in Baghdad, whose families had communicated overwhelmingly in Aramaic only a few generations before, probably did not possess the requisite Arabic cultural and linguistic knowledge to navigate the world of the Abbasid court on their own. They almost certainly relied on the small numbers of Jewish *jahbadhs* who did possess specialized knowledge of Arabic and courtly protocol to intercede on their behalf before the government.

The *jahbadhs* and Jewish communal officials in Baghdad eagerly cultivated mutually-beneficial relations with each other during the early tenth century. By allying themselves with rabbinic leadership, the *jahbadhs* ensured that Jewish communal leaders would protect their financial interests and impose sanctions on Jews who did not pay back loans or informed on them. At the same time, by allying themselves with the *jahbadhs*, Jewish communal leaders ensured that the state would honor the rulings that they issued and back them up with force, if necessary. Jewish communal leaders also hoped to use their alliances with *jahbadhs* to limit unregulated contact between the Jews under their jurisdiction and the state.<sup>39</sup> By encouraging Jews to submit petitions only through *jahbadhs* affiliated with the Yeshiva of Sura, Sa'adya tried to ensure that only petitions favorable to his own faction would be conveyed to the government.

Yet Sa'adya was by no means the only Jewish communal leader who tried to monopolize the loyalty of Baghdad's Jews. During al-Muqtadir's rule, rival geonim and exilarchs from all over Abbasid territory wrested control over the caliphate's Jews, and all of them used their

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<sup>39</sup> Ellis Rivkin identifies the tenth century as a turning point in the structure of Jewish communal relations, but he does not consider the role of the state in framing these relations. Ellis Rivkin, "The Saadia-David ben Zakkay Controversy: A Structural Analysis," in *Studies and Essays in Honor of Abraham A. Neuman*, ed. Meir Ben-Horin, Bernard D. Weinryb, Solomon Zeitlin. (Leiden: Brill, 1962): 388-423.

alliances with Jewish government officials to petition against their rivals. This section will analyze the involvement of the Abbasid state in three major Jewish intra-communal conflicts that took place during the first half of the tenth century, two of which were also alluded to in non-Jewish sources. All involved Jewish *jahbadhs* and were fought in the shadow of the Abbasid palace.

#### Kohen Šedeq vs. Mevasher ha-Kohen, 917-922

In 917, there was a disagreement over who should be appointed as the next Gaon of Pumbedita. The Babylonian Exilarch, David b. Zakkay, wanted Kohen Šedeq. He enlisted the support of Sa'adya b. Yosef al-Fayyumi, who was then affiliated with the yeshiva of Palestine. Aharon b. 'Amram, the Jewish *jahbadh* discussed in Arabic court chronicles, however, wanted to appoint Mevasher ha-Kohen b. Qimoy. Mevasher's faction enlisted the help of Aharon b. Me'ir, the gaon of Palestine. The yeshiva was divided between followers of Kohen Šedeq and followers of Mevasher for the next five years (until August of 922), when an agreement was reached that allowed both men to jointly hold the position. They abided by this agreement until Mevasher's death in December of the same year. Kohen Šedeq continued as the sole Gaon of Pumbedita until his death in 935.

Sherira Gaon briefly described this conflict in his Circular Letter (c. 986), the most complete contemporaneous institutional history of the yeshivot. He did not specify the reasons why the various officials preferred different candidates. It appears, however, that Aharon b. 'Amram, a newly powerful court banker, hoped to augment his own influence in Jewish communal affairs by opposing the exilarch, who had previously acted as the main intercessor between the community and the government. During that time, Mevasher appointed Aharon b.



Yosef, also known as Sarjado (son-in-law of Aharon b. 'Amram's son) to the First Row of the Academy of Pumbedita, probably to thank Aharon for his political support.<sup>40</sup> Year later, Aharon b. Yosef became gaon of Pumbedita even though, according to Sherira, "he was not from a rabbinic family but from among the merchants."<sup>41</sup>

This was not the first time that there was a controversy over the selection of a gaon, nor was it the first time that two individuals within the yeshivot held the same position while refusing to accept each other's authority. Yet this conflict was different. Most notably, the involvement of a Jewish *jahbadh* in yeshiva politics was unprecedented, and Mevasher's appointment of Aharon b. Yosef even more so. It marked the first time that an individual without former ties to the yeshivot officially joined the yeshiva hierarchy. Yet from then on, most sources indicate that Jewish court bankers played central roles in yeshiva politics, including taking part in deliberations over religious practice.

### The Calendar Controversy—921-923

Between 921 and 923, the Jewish community of the Islamic world was divided over the issue of calculating the calendar. The Palestinians, led by the Palestinian Gaon Aharon b. Me'ir, calculated that Passover would begin on a Sunday in 921, while the Babylonians calculated that it would begin on a Tuesday.<sup>42</sup> At its core, however, it was a struggle over authority between

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<sup>40</sup> B.M. Lewin, ed., *Sefer Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon* (Haifa, 1921), 40.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Both the Palestinians and the Babylonians used the past to legitimate their respective authorities to calculate the calendar. The Palestinians claimed that, since ancient times, they had the right to calculate the calendar. They substantiated this assertion by citing a Talmudic ban against intercalating outside of the land of Israel, and they insisted that since antiquity, the Babylonians had followed Palestinian calendrical decisions that were announced on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. The Babylonians disagreed, declaring that while they had followed in this practice in earlier generations, at one point one of their sages had gone to Palestine and learned the proper method of intercalation and that, from then on, Babylonia had calculated the calendar independently. For further explanation of the technical halakhic issues involved in intercalation, see Sacha Stern, *Calendar and Community: A History of the Jewish Calendar, Second Century BCE-Tenth Century CE* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 265ff.

Jewish leaders in Babylonia and those in Palestine, a controversy that had existed in some form since the Abbasid Caliphate united the two territories in 750.

The fight united previous rivals. Mevasher Gaon and the *jahbadh* Aharon b. 'Amrām abandoned their former-ally and the gaon of Palestine, Aharon b. Me'ir, and joined together with David ben Zakkay and Kohen Sedeq to support the Babylonian position.<sup>43</sup> Sa'adya, although ostensibly affiliated with the Yeshiva of Palestine, also supported the Babylonian faction. During the next two years, the Babylonians and Palestinians exchanged increasingly vitriolic letters advancing their own claims to authority in the matter of intercalation and attacking those of their rivals.<sup>44</sup> Both parties considered correct calculation of the calendar to be a central religious obligation, and they worried about the consequences of each other's error. When Sa'adya wrote to three of his students in Egypt regarding the matter, he emphasized that he wanted to prevent “a man of the people from erring by desecrating the festivals of God, by eating leavened bread on Passover, and by eating, drinking, and doing work on Yom Kippur.”<sup>45</sup> Throughout their letters, the supporters of the Palestinian position blamed Sa'adya for inciting the conflict and leading the Babylonians astray.

Even though the calculation of the calendar was ostensibly a “religious” matter, the letters all make reference to the involvement of the Jewish court banker, Aharon b. 'Amram, in supporting the Babylonian position. Ben Me'ir, who had assumed that his former-ally, Aharon b. 'Amram, would support him, wrote of his horror when he received letters from Aharon b. 'Amram in favor of Babylonia:

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<sup>43</sup> Rivkin, “Saadia-David Ben Zakkai,” 399.

<sup>44</sup> Eleventh -entury copies of these letters were preserved in the Cairo Geniza. They were published by Bornstein in 18xx, who did not identify the manuscripts that he used. Sacha Stern and Marina Rustow identified the surviving manuscripts and are now in the process of preparing a new critical edition of all of the geniza related to the calendar controversy. They have kindly given me access to their research notes, which I consulted in writing this section.

\*\*How should I cite this?

<sup>45</sup> Bornstein, “Mahloqet,” 83.

We thought that you were standing by the truth until the last letters arrived, those that were sent to us by... Aharon ben 'Amram...And in these (letters) are engraved words that cancel out all that was engraved in the first ones...We were hoping that good would come from you but evil came instead, and what we feared came upon us. You waged battle with us and laid in wait for us so as to shoot us in hiding and in the open.<sup>46</sup>

This clearly demonstrates the involvement of Jewish government officials in internal-Jewish debates over religious practice. Was Aharon's involvement indicative merely of the integration of Jewish government officials in rabbinic institutions? Or did Aharon actually use his connections to Abbasid political power to appeal to the state on behalf of the Babylonian position?

One might assume that the question of whether Passover should begin on a Sunday or a Tuesday would be of little interest to the Abbasid state. Yet new manuscript evidence suggests that the ruling authorities did intervene in the conflict. The geniza preserved a significant portion of a "Book of the Calendar" written in the high court of the exilarch David ben Zakkay in the year 921 (1233 SE).<sup>47</sup> The book's purpose was to ensure that future generations would understand the correct method of calculation and would not be led astray by any of Ben Me'ir's writings. The text reveals that, on multiple occasions, the Babylonians considered appealing to the state.

At first, the Babylonians explained that they did not "resolve to get letters from the king to remove [Ben Me'ir]" because "[w]e will not be able to destroy all of his writings," and they decided to "leave him alone for the day of vengeance and anger that awaits every inciter." The text thus suggests that this decision not to invoke the power of the state against Ben Me'ir at this time had more to do with the futility of using state power to suppress heretical practices than a

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<sup>46</sup> A. Guillaume, "Further Documents on the Ben Meir Controversy," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 5, no. 4 (1915): 543–557. Stern, Rustow, trans. Manuscript B.

<sup>47</sup> Stern, Rustow, trans. Manuscript G.

principled opposition to involving gentile authorities in intra-communal disputes. If anything, the assertion that they did not get letters to do away with Ben Me'ir suggests that the writer assumed that his readers would wonder why the state had not been invoked. Instead, the Babylonians wrote the "Book of the Calendar" to warn the rest of the people against Ben Me'ir's "wanton and devious" actions.

But after the book was written, according to the Babylonians, "hatred of [Ben Me'ir] went into the hearts of all the wise." Then, according to the text, the government became involved and Ben Me'ir no longer commanded any authority over the community:

The authorities became involved in the case [of Ben Me'ir]. They spoke to the *Amīr* (commander): 'The land has been delivered into the hands of a fool, woe unto its inhabitants! He is giving them water to drink from cisterns, he is tending their flock between thorns and nettles, he is making them rest in the heat, in the shadow of a cloud, and to an arid place he is leading(?) them, and also setting himself in a way that is not good.'<sup>48</sup>

Who, exactly, was the *amīr* to whom the people appealed, and which individuals appealed to him? The text does not provide any identifying information. In order to exercise his prerogatives as Gaon of Palestine, however, Ben Me'ir would have needed the support of the Abbasid state (that had regained control of Palestine and Egypt in 905). Thus, the *amīr* with the authority to remove him would have been a high-level Abbasid official. He might even have been the caliph (*amīr al-mu'aminin*, or commander of the faithful), himself. As for the question of who, exactly, mounted the appeal, it must have been someone with a connection to the highest echelons of the Abbasid government: the *jahbadh* Aharon b. 'Amrām, himself.

Indeed, while Ben Me'ir's letter is full of bitter insults against Sa'adya and the other Babylonian rabbinic leaders, he described Aharon b. 'Amrām in laudatory terms:

The crown of Israel, our precious and pleasant jewel, his honor, greatness, and holiness, Aharon ben 'Amram (may he rest in Eden) savior of the generation, who has not inclined

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<sup>48</sup> Stern, Rustow, trans. Manuscript G.

his ear to turn away from the Lord's precepts. May the Lord therefore guard him and sustain him with happiness in the land and increase for him glory over glory and splendor over splendor and sustain for him two dear sons, glorious descendants, virtuous grandchildren beloved and pleasant.<sup>49</sup>

Considering that Aharon b. 'Amram had just written a letter opposing Ben Me'ir's stance on the calendar, it seems curious that he would bother applying all of these honorifics and blessings to his opponent. This can be explained, however, by understanding the significance of Aharon b. 'Amram's position as a *jahbadh*. Ben Me'ir would have needed his continued support before the state in order to remain Gaon of Palestine. Although Ben Me'ir was not willing to concede to the Babylonian position on the calendar, he needed to preserve his relationship with Aharon b. 'Amram by any means necessary. By asserting that the entire controversy was a result of Sa'adya and David ben Zakkay (Aharon's former rivals), while bestowing blessings on Aharon, he hoped to salvage their relationship. In this, he was somewhat successful: Ben Me'ir remained gaon of Palestine until 926, three years after the calendar controversy concluded.

Further evidence for the involvement of non-Jewish authorities in the matter comes from the Nestorian Christian archbishop and theologian Elias of Nisibis (c. 1019), who referenced the controversy in the Syriac section of his bilingual Syriac-Arabic historical chronicle *Kitāb al-Azmina*, declaring, "In [the year 921 CE] there befell a division/disagreement between the Jews of the West and the Jews of the East concerning the calculation of their festivals."<sup>50</sup> Although Elias did not say anything else about the resolution of the conflict or the involvement of the authorities in it, Elias' awareness of the disagreement indicates that this seemingly-internal Jewish theological conflict came to the attention of people far outside of the Jewish community.

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<sup>49</sup> Manuscript B.

<sup>50</sup> Francois de Blois, "Some Early Islamic and Christian Sources Regarding the Jewish Calendar, (9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries)," in *Time, Astronomy, and Calendars in the Jewish Tradition*, ed. Sacha Stern and Charles Burnett (Brill: Leiden 2014), 76.

Overall, the sources indicate that Jews involved the gentile authorities in intra-communal disputes, including those which dealt with matters of actual religious practice.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, Jewish communal officials needed the support of Jewish *jahbadhs* in order to issue binding legal rulings, even on matters related to Jewish ritual practice.

*Sa 'adya-David Ben Zakkay: 930-932/938*

According to multiple Jewish and non-Jewish sources, a dispute broke out between Sa 'adya, Gaon of Sura, and the Exilarch David b. Zakkay in 932. Eventually, this dispute divided all of the Jews of Baghdad and was only resolved through the intervention of Jewish *jahbadhs* and the Abbasid authorities. According to the chronicler Natan ha-Bavli (c. 950s), the conflict began when two men under the exilarch's jurisdiction were engaged in a legal dispute with each other over their inheritance. They came to an agreement to divide the money and donate a portion of it to the exilarch. The exilarch wanted the geonim to sign off on the agreement. Sa 'adya, however, refused to do so because "he saw in [the documents] things that were not correct in his eyes." Sa 'adya tried to avoid disclosing his objection to the document, but ultimately, the exilarch's men forced him to explain. The exilarch was incensed at Sa 'adya's refusal to sign, and he sent his son to Sa 'adya to try to force him to acquiesce. When the exilarch's son could not contain his frustration, the conflict escalated. Incensed at the disrespect shown to his son, the exilarch excommunicated Sa 'adya and appointed Yosef b. Ya 'aqov as the Gaon of Sura. Sa 'adya appointed the exilarch's brother Ḥasan as a counter-exilarch. The conflict

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<sup>51</sup> That being said, while Babylonian supporters might have succeeded in stripping Ben Meir of his title as Gaon, new evidence indicates that the matter of the calendar was far from resolved. There is evidence for alternative calculations of the calendar as late as 1094. See Marina Rustow & Sacha Stern, "The Jewish Calendar Controversy of 921-922: Reconstructing the Manuscripts and the Transmission History, in *Time, Astronomy, and Calendars in the Jewish Tradition*, ed. Sacha Stern and Charles Burnett (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 81-82.

divided the entire Jewish community of Baghdad; it was ultimately resolved through the involvement of Abbasid authorities.

Natan Ha-Bavli was explicit about the role played by court bankers, particularly a certain Ibn Sarjādo, in advocating on behalf of both factions before the state:

All of the rich men of Baghdad (a reference to the court bankers) and the students of the yeshiva and the courtiers supported Rav Sa'adya with bribes and by advocating his cause in front of the king and his ministers and his advisors. And in Baghdad there was one important man and his name was Kelev<sup>52</sup> b. Sargado who helped the exilarch; he was a rich man, and he gave 60 silver coins from his own money to remove Rav Sa'adya from his place. But he could not do this since because Sa'adya had the support of the sons of Neṭira and all of the rich men of Baghdad.<sup>53</sup>

In this way, Jewish court bankers impacted internal Jewish communal politics. Sa'adya was able to remain in his position because he commanded the loyalties of the majority of Jewish courtiers, but he could not entirely do away with David ben Zakkay because of Aharon b. Sargado's counter-appeals to the state.

Portions of Ibn Sargado's polemic against Sa'adya and David ben Zakkay's letter excommunicating him were preserved in a Karaite manuscript found in the Firkovitch collection in St. Petersburg and published by A. Harkavy.<sup>54</sup> The information in Ibn Sarjādo's polemic is consistent with much of Natan's account, particularly regarding the alliance between Ben Sargado and the exilarch and both parties' recourse to state power. In the document, Ben Sargado accuses Sa'adya of desecrating the Sabbath in order to bribe a government official

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<sup>52</sup> A pun on his Arabic name, Khalāf, from the Hebrew Kelev, or dog.

<sup>53</sup> Neubauer, *MJC II*, 80

<sup>54</sup> The manuscript was published by A. Harkavy, *Zikhron ha-Ga'on Rav Sa'adyah al-Fiyumi u-sefaray* (St. Petersburg, 1891) 222-235, based on a manuscript in the Firkovitch collection (he does not identify the shelfmark). A Karaite opponent of Sa'adya Gaon copied some of his polemical texts, and he included this polemic in the same manuscript, in order to refute the claims that Sa'adya had made against 'Anan b. David, the founder of Karaism, in his *Sefer ha-Galui*. The Judeo-Arabic phrases were probably introduced by the Karaite scribe (who prefaced the text in Judeo-Arabic), in order to make the text clearer to his readers. On the ideology of the Karaite scribe and his introduction to this text, see below.

named Mubarak to install Ḥasan, the exilarch's brother, as exilarch (The Arabic text is in bold, the Hebrew in regular font):

**One day [Sa 'adya] went out with Ḥasan the brother of the exilarch to the house of Mūbarak** (presumably, a government official) **and this was witnessed by most of the Jews of Baghdad. And this, he said**, this matter resulted in many beatings to Israel from the faction of the governors for weeks and months. And he desecrated the name [of God] and also the Sabbaths by bringing gifts at the least to the deputies on [that] day.<sup>55</sup>

Sa 'adya's petitioning of the government, the exilarch declared in his letter of excommunication, had created all sorts of problems for the Jewish community. He described Sa 'adya as:

One who desecrates the name of heaven with publicity and makes and incites a great controversy in Israel. He sent quarrels between us and Ḥasan [my] brother and played me such that he caused a controversy in Israel that resulted in a cancellation of law and distortions of law, and hatred and jealousy between brother and brother, and man and his neighbor, by castrating them at the hand of the rulers and by imprisoning them in jail.<sup>56</sup>

The exilarch then attacked Sa 'adya's lineage. He claimed that Sa 'adya had been lying about his ancestry. He was not, as he claimed, a descendent of the tribe of the biblical patriarch Judah, but rather "a son of resident aliens and his fathers were circumcised and immersed" (meaning that his ancestors were converts). The exilarch continued, describing Sa 'adya as "a vile person without a name and his fathers are comparable to sheepdogs."<sup>57</sup> All of these accusations—desecrating the Sabbath, appealing to the government to advance his own position, and being from a non-noble lineage—were intended to undermine Sa 'adya's legitimacy as gaon and Ḥasan's legitimacy as exilarch.<sup>58</sup> Sa 'adya's supporters employed similar insults against the

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<sup>55</sup> Harkavy, *Zikhron*, 227, lines 2-7. The Arabic text was probably inserted by the Karaite scribe as glosses to explain and summarize Ibn Sarjādo's Hebrew prose.

<sup>56</sup> Harkavy, *Zikhron*, 232.

<sup>57</sup> Harkavy, *Zikhron*, 229.

<sup>58</sup> On the significance of noble lineage for legitimation among Jews in the medieval Islamic East, see Arnold E. Franklin, *This Noble House: Jewish Descendants of King David in the Medieval Islamic East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).



exilarch's faction.<sup>59</sup> Yet, even as they condemned Sa'adya for inciting beatings and arrests through his appeals to the government, in the same document, Sa'adya's opponents admit that they carried out beatings themselves. Ben Sarjado, himself a court banker, testified that people from the exilarch's faction "struck" Sa'adya on "the back of [his] neck" and on his "forehead" as they excommunicated him, telling him, "you will not be resurrected for all eternity."<sup>60</sup>

The conflict even caught the attention of contemporaneous Muslim chroniclers. In a section of his book about Jewish scholars and sects, the geographer Al-Mas'ūdī (d. 956) recalled meeting Sa'adya, and he presented a brief account of his conflict with the exilarch:

And among [the Jews] was S'ayīd b. Ya'aqūb<sup>61</sup> al-Fayyūmi who was Rabbanite in *madhab* also and he studied under Abī Kathīr, and his translation was preferred by most of them. And there were stories about him in Iraq with the exilarch Dawud b. Zakkay of the seed of David who raised an objection against him. And this was during the caliphate of al-Muqtadir. And [the conflict] formed factions among the Jews on their (Sa'adya and David b. Zakkay) account. The vizier 'Alī b. Isā<sup>62</sup> and others among the viziers and the *qādis* and the men of learning appeared in a majlis in order to decide between them. And al-Fayyūmi was appointed head over most of them and they submitted to him.<sup>63</sup>

Al-Mas'ūdī's account both differs from and complements Natan's version of the story. Al-Mas'ūdī set the conflict squarely during the caliphate of al-Muqtadir (d. 932), while Natan implied that it was only resolved years later. Nevertheless, the fact that three different texts, written by both Jews and Muslims, all record the involvement of the Abbasid state in this

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<sup>59</sup> See Rivkin, "The Saadia-David b. Zakkay Controversy." In *Sefer-Ha-Galui*, Sa'adya referred to Kohen Šedeq as "a son of grave-diggers," a devastating insult since, as a Kohen, Kohen Šedeq could not enter a graveyard or handle dead bodies. See Franklin, *This Noble House*, 110. For an example of a counter-polemic that accuses only the exilarch's faction of invoking the state, see Abraham ibn Dawūd, *Sefer Ha-Qabbala*. In particular, Ibn Dawūd preserved a version of the story that accused only David b. Zakkay of involving the government against Sa'adya and even trying to get Sa'adya put to death, forcing Sa'adya into hiding for seven years. There is record of this in many surviving tenth-century sources.

<sup>60</sup> Harkavy, *Zikhron*, 230, 14-18.

<sup>61</sup> Sa'adya's father's name was actually Yosef. This is either a scribal error or al-Mas'ūdī did not know Sa'adya's actual name.

<sup>62</sup> This vizier was deposed in 925, while Sa'adya was not appointed Gaon until 928. It is possible that Al-Mas'ūdī's information was incorrect. It is also possible that he was referring to another member of Ali ibn Isa's family, many of whom served as viziers under al-Muqtadir.

<sup>63</sup> Al-Mas'ūdī, *Bibliographorum Geographicorum Arabicorum*, ed. MJ de Goege, VIII, 113.

conflict is clear evidence for the role of the state in a seemingly internal Jewish dispute and the involvement of Jewish courtiers in shaping the terms of the conflict.

Ben Sargado's polemical text does not say anything about what happened after Sa'adya was excommunicated. Al-Mas'ūdī suggests that the conflict between Sa'adya and the exilarch was resolved through mediation in the court of one of al-Muqtadir's viziers, presumably before his death in 932. Yet in Natan Ha-Bavli's narrative, the conflict persisted for another six years. It appears that as part of the "separation" agreement between the two parties the jurisdictions of the gaon and the exilarch were entirely detached. Whereas previously the exilarch needed the geonim to endorse his ruling, in this state of affairs, they were not to interact with each other at all and administered their own affairs independently. This was a problem, however, when an individual loyal to the exilarch had a legal case involving an individual under Sa'adya's jurisdiction. According to Natan, this situation quickly became violent, and it convinced the people that they needed to find someone to mediate between the gaon and the exilarch once and for all.<sup>64</sup> They turned to the court banker, Bishr b. Aharon, who was Ben Sargado's father-in-law:

And they [the community members] all gathered around Bishr b. Aharon who was the father-in-law of Khalaf b. Sargado<sup>65</sup> who was a great man in Baghdad and was one of the important men of the place (courtiers), and they explained to him how they arrived at the division of Israel and how difficult their situation is. They said to him: rise, for the word is yours, and we are your people and maybe we will be able to do away with the controversy which is solely dependent on your son-in-law Khalaf b. Sargado.

It seems that the people chose Bishr because of the prestige of his position as an Abbasid courtier, his relative neutrality in the conflict, and his ability to influence his powerful son-in-

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<sup>64</sup> Neubauer, *MJC* II, 82

<sup>65</sup> A reference to Aharon b. Sargado (Harūn or Khalāf ibn Sarjado in Arabic).

law. He acted as a mediator, entreating both individuals to make peace with each other. First, he said to the exilarch:

What have you done, and until when will you exacerbate the controversy and not guard yourself from punishment? Fear your lord, and remove yourself from the controversy for you know how strong it is. And now see if you can repair your ways with Rav Sa'adya and make peace with him and rest what is in your heart against him.

Bishr similarly implored Sa'adya to make peace. Both men "heeded his words."

On the Fast of Esther, Bishr gathered both factions on two separate lots of his property. Natan describes the scene as rich in tension and drama. Each man's supporters lined up facing each other. Bishr acted as messenger between the two rival factions, and he "went between them with words of peace." Eventually, Bishr's efforts were successful. Sa'adya and David b. Zakkay "entreated each other and kissed each other and embraced each other."

In holding the negotiations in this manner, Bishr imitated Abbasid courtly practices of mediation. Usually, when Abbasid courtiers negotiated, the two rival parties were held in separate sections of the palace, and a mediator went between them. Sometimes, the mediator relayed each side's messages faithfully, while at other times, the mediator took a more active role in trying to shape the negotiations, modifying one or both parties' words in order to encourage a deal.<sup>66</sup> It appears that Bishr's mediation strategy inclined toward the latter. Even after they embraced, Sa'adya and the exilarch were still skeptical of each other's intentions. To seal the deal, Bishr insisted that Saadya and the exilarch eat the festive Purim meal at his house that evening. After two days of feasting, wine had washed away the bitterness between the two men. Their reconciliation was complete. Sa'adya was restored to his position as Gaon, although Yosef b. Ya'aqov, his replacement, continued to hold his title and earn income from the yeshiva.

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<sup>66</sup> The procedure of mediation in the Abbasid court is best described by M. van Berkel, "The Vizier and the Harem Stewardess."

Bishr was able to negotiate between the two individuals as a result of the status that his relationship with the state conferred. By the end of this period, the Jewish court bankers had emerged as a formidable group that played an integral role in internal Jewish communal leadership. They became tied to the yeshivot through marriage and obtained positions within the yeshiva hierarchy themselves. The banker Aharon b. Yosef b. Sargado, Sa'adya's rival, became gaon of Pumbedita in 942. A Judeo-Arabic text described Sahl b. Netira, the son of Netira and the daughter of the gaon Kohen Sedeq, not only as a sophisticated Abbasid courtier, but as a learned rabbinic scholar:

[Sahl] is strong at the recitation of the Miqra (Torah), Mishnah, and Talmud. He has mastery of and is familiar with everything in the study of religion (*dīn*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and he is a student of Rav Sa'adya. And he has issued various legal decisions.<sup>67</sup>

In administering the yeshivot, the court bankers made use of Abbasid courtly protocol, a phenomenon that would intensify throughout the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Notably, Jewish communal leaders did not perceive a tension between traditional Jewish values which abhorred gentile politics and their own ties to the Abbasid state as mediated by the *jahbadhs*. As the next section will argue, in the first half of the tenth century, Jewish leaders described even an ideal Jewish polity in the diaspora as one in which Jewish leaders had close relations with gentile kings.

### **Part III: “The Caliph grants his desires”: Jewish Political Legitimation in the early tenth century**

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<sup>67</sup> Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 11.

Jewish leaders not only depended on state power to provide the force necessary to back up their rulings, but also used their proximity to the state to assert their authority on a rhetorical level. Although they had inherited a tradition that was skeptical, at best, of relations with gentile governments, Jewish leaders in the early tenth century took great pride in the status that their relations with the government afforded them, and they were eager to invoke their close relationship with the state to lend legitimacy to their rule.

This ideology is most evident in the chronicle of Natan Ha-Bavli (c. 950s).<sup>68</sup> The first half of the text, discussed above, described a series of conflicts between rival geonim and exilarchs in Baghdad during the first half of the tenth century. It concludes with the narrative of dramatic reconciliation between Sa'adya Gaon and his former-enemy, the exilarch David b. Zakkay. The second half of the text is a synchronic account of the idealized operations of the main Jewish political institutions of Abbasid Baghdad (namely, the yeshivot and the exilarchate) and the relations between them. In particular, Natan describes the exilarch as conducting himself in the same manner as a gentile king.

Menahem Ben Sasson argues that the account of Natan Ha-Bavli was written in the middle of the tenth century to reassure the Jews of Qayrawan that the yeshivot still commanded their authority even after the instability that arose from the many intra-communal conflicts discussed in the text. Although the text was not entirely factually accurate—it contains some supernatural elements, and its account of the expulsion of the exilarch Uqba misidentifies many

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<sup>68</sup> Judeo-Arabic sections of Natan Ha-Bavli's text were preserved in Geniza manuscripts. The first section was published and translated by Israel Friedlander, "The Arabic Original of the Report of R. Natan Hababli," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 17, no. 4 (1905), 747–761, and subsequent Judeo-Arabic manuscripts were found and published by Menahem Ben-Sasson, "The Structure, Goals, and Content of the Story of Natan Ha-Babli [Heb.]," in *Culture and Society in Medieval Jewry*, eds. M. Ben-Sasson, R. Bonfil and J.R. Hacker (Jerusalem, 1989). Natan's entire account was later translated into Hebrew, and Neubauer published it at the end of "Seder 'Olam Zuta" in *Medieval Jewish Chronicles I* (Oxford, 1895), 77–88. Menahem Ben Sasson has argued that the Hebrew version is largely complete, and it represents a mostly accurate version of the older Judeo-Arabic text.

of the main actors—it was an authentic mid-tenth century text, and Natan likely did have some first-hand experience in Baghdad. Moreover, as Ben Sasson explains, the author exhibited a great deal of familiarity with Abbasid political culture as described in contemporaneous Arabic texts.

As Chapter 2 will argue, many of the political relations described in Natan’s text had ceased to exist after the collapse of the Abbasid Caliphate in the middle of the tenth century. Thus, the text was written not only to assure Jews abroad that the situation in Baghdad had returned to normal after the infighting within the yeshivot, but also to convince them that the decline of Abbasid fortunes in the mid-tenth century did not signal the decline of the yeshivot. In this sense, as Albert Baumgarten and Marina Rustow argue, Natan’s account should be interpreted as a text that was “recorded for the consumption of outsiders with embellishments just at the moment when both the customs that it claimed to describe and the political power on which they rested were in steep decline.”<sup>69</sup> Indeed, Natan’s chronicle demonstrates that Jews held the Abbasid court in esteem, so much so that even writing at a time when the government had collapsed, they believed that the best way to advance their own authority within the Jewish community was to continue to present themselves as Arabic courtiers with close relations to the government.

The first half of the chronicle dealt with conflict within the Jewish community, and it was explicit about the role played by appeals to the non-Jewish government in waging these conflicts. Notably, Natan Ha-Bavli never condemned these appeals to non-Jewish authorities; in his narrative, every single Jewish communal official appealed to the state through the intercession of Jewish courtiers. The issues inherent in appealing to the state—the lack of permanence of the

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<sup>69</sup> Albert I. Baumgarten and Marina Rustow, “Judaism and Tradition: Continuity, Change, and Innovation,” in *Jewish Studies at the Crossroads of Anthropology and History: Authority, Diaspora, Tradition*, ed. Ra’anan S. Boustan, Oren Kosansky, and Marina Rustow (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 227-228.

rulings, the frequent reversals of fate—were the same as those manifest in contemporaneous Islamic chronicles that glorified the state.

The second half of Natan's narrative provides a synchronic depiction of an idealized Jewish communal leadership structure. Even in this idealized image, the state continued to play a central role in legitimating Jewish communal leadership. His account begins with a description of the process by which a new exilarch was chosen. He explains that "the two heads of the yeshivot gathered together with all of the heads of the community and the elders in the house of a great man in Baghdad, one of the great ones of the generation, such as Neṭira" to select him.<sup>70</sup> This would indicate that even in a time of "peace" Jewish government officials were expected to play a central role in the selection of Jewish communal leaders.

After his coronation, according to Natan, the exilarch almost never left his house. This echoes the behavior of the Abbasid caliph who remained sequestered in his palace. The only time he does so is to meet with the caliph. According to Natan, the exilarch could meet with the caliph whenever he wanted:

When [the exilarch] wants to have a reception with the king to request something from him or to greet him, he asks the ministers of the king and his slaves. They always allow him to enter to speak to the king, who gives him permission to enter his presence, and he gives him permission and commands the guards to let him enter.<sup>71</sup>

By the tenth century, the Abbasid caliph remained mostly secluded, and there is no evidence that al-Muqtadir ever met face-to-face with a Jewish exilarch. By presenting such meetings as regular occurrences, Natan emphasized the proximity of the exilarch to the center of Abbasid power. Moreover, according to Natan, the caliph's slaves and officials all received the exilarch with great excitement:

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<sup>70</sup> MJC II, 83.

<sup>71</sup> MJC II, 85.

And when he enters all of the slaves of the king run before him, and he already prepared in his bosom gold coins to give to the slaves running before him, such that they prevent him from entering [by mobbing him]...they honor him and grab his hand until he goes and stands before the king and bows before him.<sup>72</sup>

Similarly, the caliph also treated the exilarch with respect and granted all of his wishes:

And the king asks him about his well-being and about his affairs and about what brought him in. [The exilarch] requests permission from [the king], to speak to his face, and he grants it to him. He begins with praises and blessings that were prepared for him previously. Then, he recounts for (the king) the customs of his fathers and the fathers of his fathers regarding [the exilarchs], and he placates him with words in Arabic until he grants his request and gives him what he asked for. And (the king) writes for him all of the [decrees] that he requested from him, and (the exilarch) leaves there and departs from him in a state of happiness and peace.<sup>73</sup>

The exilarch is honored by all of the caliph's retinues, conducts himself like a high-level official, and the caliph himself grants all of the exilarch's desires.

Of course, Natan had never witnessed an audience between the caliph and the exilarch, and it is impossible to say whether the account bears any relation to the actual reality of such meetings or even if such meetings ever occurred at all.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, the narrative served to glorify the exilarch's rule by projecting his proximity to the center of Abbasid power.

Furthermore, Natan explains how the exilarch used his relationship with the caliph to suppress insubordination:

And R. Natan said this: that he saw that the son of David b. Zakkay went out to Fars, which was in the jurisdiction (*reshut*) of his father. They did not give him honor, nor did they greet him, so he sent word to his father. His father sent writs of excommunication (*petiḥot*) and bans (*heremot*). He told the deputy, and the deputy told the king of Baghdad, and the king of Baghdad wrote to the king of Fars, instructing him to support [David Ben Zakkay] and help them. When the king of Fars heard that the letter from the king of Baghdad arrived, he supported [David

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<sup>72</sup> MJC II, 85.

<sup>73</sup> MJC, 85.

<sup>74</sup> The Jewish exilarch, or *ra'is al-jālūt*, is discussed in multiple contemporaneous Muslim sources. Overall, Muslims held the exilarch's ancestry in great esteem, and most of them believed that the exilarch commanded the authority of all Jews. The exilarch also took part in religious disputations in Muslim courts. Still, there is no reference in Arabic sources to a meeting between the exilarch and the caliph like the one that Natan describes. See Gil, "The Exilarchate," in *The Jews of Medieval Islam: Community, Society, Identity*, ed. Daniel Frank (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 33-67.



Ben Zakkay], and he [the son of the exilarch] took a lot of money from them, from Fars, which was in the *reshut* of his father, and from all of its territories. When he arrived and returned to Baghdad, none of the heads of the yeshivot objected to him in this matter.<sup>75</sup>

In this anecdote, the exilarch appealed to the caliph and was able to use the force of the state to enforce his own rights to the income from Fars. The other Jewish communal leaders raise no objection. The infighting from the previous decades was over. The heads of the yeshivot and the exilarchs had settled on mutually-agreeable borders, and, most significantly, Muslim rulers supported this agreement.<sup>76</sup>

This is not to say that relations with the government, alone, could legitimate a leader within the Jewish community. Throughout this period, many texts censured Jewish leaders for “buying their position from the state” rather than deriving their authority from Jewish tradition. For example, during the calendar controversy, the Babylonians accused Ben Me’ir of having been elevated by the gentiles. Similarly, the Karaite scribe who copied the polemic against Sa’adya Gaon emphasized the “taboo against anyone who appeals for help from the Muslims for them to elevate him to the headship,” asserting that the text proved that Sa’adya was one of those false leaders who derived his authority from the state.<sup>77</sup> All of these accusations, however, were accompanied by accusations that a given official also did not possess the requisite credentials to hold the position: Sa’adya, for example, was accused of fabricating his ancestry and violating Jewish law by desecrating the Sabbath.

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<sup>75</sup> MJC, 86.

<sup>76</sup> This story subtly suggests that the political scene had shifted. In Natan’s previous accounts, rival Jewish leaders had appealed, through court bankers, to the caliph himself or the king of Baghdad regarding their rights to the income from provinces far outside of Baghdad. In this case, the king of Baghdad is different from the king of Fars, and the king of Baghdad needed to write a letter to the king of Fars asking him to support the son of David Ben Zakkai. This might be a subtle reference to the Buyid confederation, in which separate kings ruled over Baghdad, Isfahan, and Rayy. The moral of the story was that, even though the caliphate had fragmented, the Jews were still able to rely on a somewhat united polity to enforce their rights and authority.

<sup>77</sup> Harkavy, *Zikhron*, 225.

Overall, during the first half of the tenth century, Jewish leaders were eager to invoke the state whenever it could help them. And their relations with the state, in tandem with such traditional Jewish modes of legitimation as nobility of ancestry, communal consensus, and erudition all worked to augment their authority among Jews throughout the Mediterranean. Although the state by itself could not legitimate a Jewish leader, it was an essential aspect of that leader's claims to authority and the ways in which he and his followers projected his power.

### *Conclusions*

The relatively strong Abbasid state under al-Muqtadir facilitated the rise of a new class of Jewish courtiers. The Jewishness of these courtiers was rather tangential to their function in the Abbasid bureaucracy. Still, certain aspects of Jewish communal organization could make Jews particularly useful in these positions. First, Jewish mercantile networks had developed methods of transporting money across great distances through the use of letters of credit. Second, the ability to compel a Jewish communal leader to excommunicate someone provided an enforcement mechanism outside of official state channels for viziers depositing their private funds with Jewish *jahbadhs*. Third, traditional legal prohibitions against informing on fellow Jews meant that a vizier could be more confident that his money would be concealed and that a banker's compatriots would not inform on him to the authorities. All of these factors contributed to the rise of Jewish elites at court.

With their newfound access to power, Jewish courtiers came to accept petitions on behalf of Jews and present them before the caliph. The state was relatively powerful until the mid-930s, and Jewish leaders established alliances with Jewish court bankers. This new political situation changed the shape of the Jewish community. It challenged the traditional role of the exilarch as

the main intermediary with the state and destabilized what may once have been commonly accepted boundaries between the various Jewish communal institutions, both within Baghdad and throughout the caliphate. This complicated the division of power and authority that had previously existed among Jewish communal leaders, leading to the various intra-communal disputes discussed in this chapter.

Rather than viewing the involvement of the gentile government as a problem, the rabbis very much took pride in their close relations with the state, and they used their proximity to state power to advance their authority and prestige among Jews outside of Baghdad. Sa'adya's letter, Natan Ha-Bavli's text, and even the Book of the Calendar all invoke relations with gentile authorities to project the power of Babylonia. Although a relationship with state power alone was not a sufficient claim to authority, it was an important aspect of Jewish political claims throughout this period.

Yet all of the events discussed in this chapter took place during a time of relative stability. The economic foundations of the caliphate and of the Jewish community were fairly secure during the reign of Al-Muqtadir. Throughout the early tenth century, the yeshivot and the exilarchs continued to earn income on their landholdings, even as they squabbled over the exact distribution of this income. Jewish leaders could rely on a relatively powerful state apparatus to enforce their rulings and support the agreements that they made with each other.

But only a few years later, in 946, the caliphate officially collapsed when the Abbasid caliph al-Muktafi was forced to submit to the rule of the Daylamite Buyid Amīr Mu'izz al-Dawla. How would this situation impact the Jewish community? What would happen when the foundations of the court bankers' power—the Abbasid state—had fallen apart? When the traditional Jewish institutions of Baghdad lost their income? When economic and political

turmoil destabilized the existing political order? The next chapter will examine the changes in Jewish politics that arose as a result of the collapse of the Abbasid caliphate beginning in 932.

Chapter 2: “We must go out to them ourselves”: The Babylonian Yeshivot and the Buyid State, 933-1028

In 953, just eight years after the Buyids has wrested control of Baghdad, an anonymous Yeshiva official wrote to a Jewish notable in al-Andalus describing the dire predicament that the yeshivot were facing:

We no longer have any *reshuyot* from which to obtain our daily bread for they have been destroyed. And from those that do remain we must go out to them ourselves, because those in power in the yeshiva, the judges, enter our *reshuyot*. In addition, the lands which we owned have been destroyed and were lost during the bad years which have passed over us. We have lost our money and our land.<sup>1</sup>

Although the writer did not specify what, exactly, took place during “the bad years,” his reader probably needed no explanation. The entire Arabic-speaking world knew that the previous twenty years of political upheaval and economic decline had devastated the region of Iraq with disastrous consequences for all of its inhabitants, Jews and non-Jews alike.

After the caliph al-Muqtadir’s death in 932, the Abbasid caliphs were greatly weakened. By 936, the caliph had effectively lost all control over the army, and throughout the 930s and the 940s, rival military leaders grappled for control over Baghdad. It was a time of violence, economic decay, and political fragmentation. The caliph had been rendered powerless, reduced to a mere figurehead, a situation that would persist for the next hundred years, when Iraq was ruled by the Buyid confederation.

How did this impact the Jewish community of Baghdad, whose institutions had been inextricably bound up with the institutions of the Abbasid Caliphate itself? What would the

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<sup>1</sup> Bodl. MS Heb f 34, fs. 39-44r. Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 13.

consequences of political fragmentation be for a community that had derived its own power and authority through its relationship with a centralized state?

On the one hand, this was a time of hardship, both for Babylonian Jewry as a whole and for the yeshivot. As the letter indicates, the yeshivot lost access to the sources of income on which they had relied on the past. The Yeshiva of Sura closed from 945 until around 987, and Pumbedita was marred by internal conflict and poverty. A relatively large number of letters have survived from the middle of the tenth century, and nearly all of them include plaintive pleas for financial support, suggesting that the yeshivot could not rely on income from Iraq in the same way as they had in the past. On the other hand, as Goitein recognized, there is more evidence of donations and texts sent between the yeshivot and their followers during the late tenth and early eleventh centuries than from any other period.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter seeks to understand this phenomenon. How did the yeshivot continue to survive—and thrive—without access to the same forms of political power that they had enjoyed in the past? Part I will examine how the breakdown of the centralized Abbasid administration and the rise of the Buyids impacted the status of Jewish court bankers in Buyid territory. Part II considers how this environment affected the operations of the yeshivot and their ability to use their connection to centralized political power to perform favors for their followers. Part III explores how these changes in political organization forced Jewish leaders to re-conceptualize their own relationship to the state and project their authority in a new way.

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<sup>2</sup> S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, Vol II (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 204.

## Part I: The Fragmentation of the Abbasid Caliphate and its Effect on Jewish *Jahbadhs*

As Chapter 1 argued, in the first half of the tenth century, Jewish court bankers had risen to power in the centralized office of the caliph al-Muqtadir. The court bankers were able to provide loans to the caliph's viziers whenever needed, and they safeguarded the money owned by rival viziers. Although the caliph's viziers rose and fell, the court bankers remained in their positions throughout the entirety of al-Muqtadir's reign, managing the financial system of the entire caliphate.

After al-Muqtadir's death, however, this delicately-balanced system collapsed. Former viziers and courtiers engaged in outright rebellion against the new caliph, who lost control over a great deal of the army. According to the Muslim historian Ibn Miskawayh (late-10<sup>th</sup> c.), in 936, the caliph ceded control of the army to his vizier Ibn Rā'iq, and he granted him the title of *amīr-al-umarā'*. This effectively transferred all administrative power to the amirs, a situation which Ibn Miskawayh said persisted until his own day:

From this time [936] the power of the viziers ceased. The vizier no longer had control of the provinces, the bureaus, or the departments. ... Ibn Rā'iq and his secretary had control of the whole business of state, and the same has been the case with all who have held the Princeship from the time of Ibn Rā'iq to this date. The revenue from the provinces is transmitted to the treasury of the amirs, they order and prohibit with regard to it, and expend it as they please, while remitting what they choose to the Sultan for his expenses. The treasuries (*biyūt al-amwāl*) became obsolete.”<sup>3</sup>

This meant that the centralized treasuries in which Jewish court bankers had risen to power, including the office of the *jahbadhs*, the *dīwān al-jahābadha*, had also become obsolete. Financial administration was decentralized. By 946, the caliph, confined to his palace, was forced to cede all of his power to the Buyids, a Persian and Shiite dynasty.

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<sup>3</sup> Miskawayh, *Tajārūb al-Umam*, Vol. I, 352; trans, Vol. IV, 396.

The Buyids divided up their territory among various military commanders, giving them complete control over the revenues of a given territory. The development of this new system of land grants, called the *iqṭāʿ* system, effectively eliminated the centralized financial offices of the caliphate in which the Jewish court bankers had risen to power.<sup>4</sup> Instead, various officials took control of the administration of increasingly-smaller territories.

During the Buyid era personal relationships pervaded political culture. “Small-scale” associations, often hierarchical patron-client relationships, formed between individuals in the void left by the collapse of the Caliphate. As Roy Mottahadeh argues, society came to be characterized by networks of personal dependency, not by any sort of wider group coherence or shared ideals.<sup>5</sup>

For Muslims, the Buyid period represented something of a crisis of political ideals. The sense of Islamic solidarity—a people (*umma*) united under a rightly guided caliph—on which the Abbasids had swept to power had ceased to be. The caliph, the representative of the Prophet Muhammad on Earth and the rightful leader of Sunni Muslims, had been rendered powerless, reduced to a mere figurehead. Nevertheless, as Mottahadeh argues, reciprocal relations combined to create a resilient social order that prioritized individual achievement over ethnic or religious group identity. Marina Rustow suggests that the breakdown in Islamic notions of solidarity during this period yielded benefits for Jews, allowing them to take part in courtly life to a greater extent than before.<sup>6</sup> The depictions of Jewish officials in Buyid-era chronicles composed by Muslim elites corroborates this.

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<sup>4</sup> On the development of the *iqṭāʿ* system in Buyid Iraq, see Sato Tsugitaka, *State and Rural Society in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 18–41. On the impact of the *iqṭāʿ* system on Buyid governance and institutions, see John Donahue, *The Buwayhid Dynasty in Iraq: Shaping Institutions for the Future* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 229–262.

<sup>5</sup> Roy Mottahadeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Marina Rustow, “Patronage in the Context of Solidarity and Reciprocity: Two Paradigms of Social Cohesion in the Premodern Mediterranean,” in *Patronage, Production and Transmission: Books in Medieval and Early Modern Jewish Cultures*, ed. M. E. Alfonso & J. Decter, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 13–44. *Idem.*, “Formal and Informal



## Jewish Officials in Buyid Courts

During the Buyid period, there was a proliferation of competing provincial courts throughout the eastern Islamic world. These courts modeled themselves on the former Abbasid court in Baghdad and employed a relatively large number of Jewish and Christian officials. Buyid rulers never attempted to enforce *dhimmī* laws, and they seldom questioned the right of Jews to serve in Islamic governments or to hold positions of authority over Muslims.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, more Jews held positions in Muslim courts than ever before. Buyid officials employed Jewish officials as financial administrators, and they relied on them to manage their personal funds, provide administrative expertise, and advance loans whenever necessary. Chroniclers still referred to these individuals as *jahbadhs*, but the position did not have the same relationship to the centralized financial administration of the caliphate as it once had. Instead, the *jahbadhs* of the Buyid period served primarily as private money collectors for individual Buyid officials. For example, the *kātib* Ibn Shīrẓād had a Jewish *jahbadh*, ‘Alī b. Hārūn. Similarly, at least three Jewish bankers allied themselves with Abu ‘Abd-allāh al-Barīdī, including Sahl b. Naẓīr, a certain Ya ‘aqub, and Isrā’īl b. Sāliḥ. Isrā’īl b. Sāliḥ was close enough to al-Barīdī that he narrated an account of events in al-Barīdī’s life to contemporaneous historians.<sup>8</sup>

Although the Buyids had come to power through force, they tried to legitimate their rule through “the reflected glory of culture.”<sup>9</sup> Political fragmentation also contributed to the

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Patronage among Jews in the Islamic East: Evidence from the Cairo Geniza,” *Al-Qanṭara: Revista de Estudios Árabes* 29 (2008): 81–122.

<sup>7</sup> This was very much debated and condemned among Muslim jurists. As Luke Yarbrough has argued, the ‘*ulamā*’ themselves wanted access to power, so they condemned vigorously the employment of *dhimmīs* within the government. See L. Yarbrough, “Upholding God’s Rule: Early Muslim Juristic Opposition to the State Employment of non-Muslims,” *Islamic Law and Society* 19, no. 1 (2012): 11–85.

<sup>8</sup> Isrā’īl the *jahbadh*: Miskawayh, Vol. II, 52–53.

<sup>9</sup> J. L. Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival during the Buyid Age* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 29.

flourishing of intellectual life, as rival emirs and viziers in the many provincial courts competed for prestige by trying to attract the most renowned scholars to their court. By the mid-tenth century, participation in Arabophone intellectual life provided a great deal of social and political currency, and it was beneficial for rulers and scholars alike. A ruler used *majlis* to engender a sense of consensus and community among elite members of the different, often competing political, religious, and ethnic factions under their control and to compel these individuals to be obligated to thank him for his beneficence (*shukr ala ni 'ama*).<sup>10</sup> Scholars, in turn, formed bonds with individuals from other segments of society, and they were able to leverage these networks to connect to powerful individuals who could perform favors for them in the future.

In this way, Buyid political culture invited Jews (and non-Muslims in general) to participate in courtly life, possibly to a greater extent than they had previously. By entering into communication with scholars and debating Muslims and Christians in front of a Buyid prince, a Jew could gain at least some access to local political power. He might be able to obtain favors from a Buyid *amīr* or vizier who was impressed with his level of erudition or rhetorical skill. Muslim and Christian intellectuals both described corresponding with Jews, and when they had questions about Jewish belief or practice, they did not hesitate to call on Jews.<sup>11</sup> Many Jews corresponded with intellectuals present in courtly circles, even if they themselves did not reside at court.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Pomerantz, "Licit Magic," 197.

<sup>11</sup> Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible from Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* (Leiden: Brill, 1996). Adang argues that Muslim writers in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries had Jewish informants and accurately described different sects within Judaism and their versions of the Torah.

<sup>12</sup> In particular, Abū 'Alī 'Īsā b. Zur'a, a Jacobite Christian and one of the main translators of the Aristotelian corpus and one of the most prominent Christian philosophers in the circle of the vizier Ibn Sa'dān, corresponded with both Bishr b. Finhās b. Shu'ayf al-Hāsib and Dawūd b. Mūsaj. See David Sklare, *Shemu'el ben Hofni Gaon and his Cultural World: Texts and Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 114, and below.

For example, at the end of the tenth century, the Jewish accountant (*al-Ḥāsib*) Bishr b. Finḥas b. Shu 'ayb wrote Ibn Zur'a, the Jacobite Christian companion of the vizier Ibn Sa 'dān to ask about the differences between Judaism and Christianity.<sup>13</sup> Ibn Zur'a was impressed with Bishr's questions, and responded to them in 997. In the text, he made reference to another Jewish scholar, Dawūd b. Mūsaj, an affiliate of al-Sijistanī. He described him as "my friend" (*ṣadīq*) and as "one of the foremost thinkers among the Jews."<sup>14</sup> In this way, philosophic inter-religious correspondence created bonds between individuals who otherwise would never have come into contact with each other.

The descendants of al-Muqtadir's court bankers, the Banū 'Imrām, patronized a group of Jews studying Greek philosophy (*falsafa*) in Moṣul. The group met in the synagogue on Sabbaths and holidays.<sup>15</sup> In 952, two individuals from this group, Bishr b. Sam'ān b. 'Irs b. 'Uthmān and Ibn Abī Sa'īd b. 'Uthmān, composed a letter to the Christian Yaḥyā b. 'Adī, asking him about various topics related to Aristotelian thought and its reception in Late Antiquity, indicating a deep knowledge of philosophy. In his response, Yaḥyā praised the Jewish letter-writer, "complimenting him on the high rank he has attained in these studies."<sup>16</sup> In 983, a Jewish wool-merchant, Ibn Salḥūn, wrote an account of his participation in this study group, entitled *Kitāb al-Manāẓir*. At least two of the men with whom he studied held titles from the yeshivot: Sahl b. Ishāq was *Alluf* of the Yeshiva of Sura and Efrayim b. Saṭya was the *Resh Kallah* of the yeshiva who was appointed judge of Moṣul by Aaron b. Sarjādo.<sup>17</sup> He described Efrayim as "the

<sup>13</sup> Sbath, *Vingt Traités*, 19-52. Discussed in Sklare, *Samuel ben Hofni*, 114.

<sup>14</sup> Sklare, *Samuel ben Hofni*, 114., 45n. Sbath, *Vingt Traités*, 47.

<sup>15</sup> Pines, "A Tenth Century Philosophical Correspondence," *PAAJR*, 24 (1955), 103f, especially 104, n.6.

<sup>16</sup> Pines, "Philosophical Correspondence," 104.

<sup>17</sup> Sklare, *Samuel ben Hofni*, 119-120

best of the people of our time in the religious sciences and fascinated by other sciences as well.”<sup>18</sup>

Some geonim and exilarchs took part in disputations at Buyid courts (*majālis*) as well. Two Judeo-Arabic manuscripts of theological works by the Buyid vizier Ibn ‘Abbad have been found in the Cairo Geniza.<sup>19</sup> According to al-Tawḥīdī, the Jewish Exilarch debated the vizier Ibn ‘Abbād in Rayy on the “inimitability of the Koran.” Later, the vizier said that he was happy that he beat him since the Jews have a reputation for being good at debate.<sup>20</sup> In a polemic against Shemu’el b. Ḥofni, the Karaite Yūsuf al-Baṣīr reports that Shemu’el b. Ḥofni took part in the *majlis* of a vizier.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of the extent of their participation in physical *majlis*, the later geonim engaged with Islamic scholastic theology (more specifically, Mu‘tazili thought) in nearly all of the texts that they composed in Judeo-Arabic. Many of them responded directly to the arguments of Muslim theologians (*mutakalimūn*). Shemu’el b. Ḥofni’s ‘Treatise on the Abrogation of the Law’ addressed the *mutakalimūn* Ibn Khallād and Abu ‘Abdallāh al-Baṣrī by name.<sup>22</sup>

As demonstrated by the previous examples—in which a wool-merchant, an accountant, and a Talmudic scholar engaged in intellectual exchange with Muslim viziers and the philosophers they patronized—the relative intellectual openness of Buyid political culture allowed for a greater degree of social mobility than under the united Abbasid caliphate. This is also evident in the actual positions that Jews held in Buyid courts. For example, when Bajkam

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<sup>18</sup> Sklare, *Shemu’el b. Hofni*, 121.

<sup>19</sup> Wilferd Madelung and Sabine Schmidke, *Al-Ṣāḥib Ibn ‘Abbād Promoter of Rational Theology: Two Mu‘tazilī Kalām texts from the Cairo Geniza* (Leiden: Brill, 2016). Likely, as more of the Arabic and Judeo-Arabic literary manuscripts from the Firkovitch collection are analyzed and published, more evidence for Jewish correspondence with Muslim and Christian theologians and philosophers will be uncovered.

<sup>20</sup> al-Tawḥīdī, *Akhlaq al-Wazīrayn*, 299-301.

<sup>21</sup> According to Sklare, *Shemu’el b. Hofni*, 110n.31.

<sup>22</sup> Sklare, *Shemu’el b. Hofni*, 110.

conquered Baghdad and expelled many of the caliph al-Rāḍī's men in 938, he retained the Jewish *jahbadh* 'Alī b. Khalāf, and he even appointed him as *kātib* in 938 and clothed him in a robe of honor.<sup>23</sup> In this role, 'Alī b. Khalāf safeguarded Bajkam's money, worked as his chief administrator, and paid fines on his behalf.<sup>24</sup> Others rose to even higher positions: a Jew named Ruzbah served as governor of Sīrāf, a Persian city under Buyid control.<sup>25</sup>

Some Muslims were uncomfortable with the high status of certain Jewish officials and the intermingling between Jews and Muslims. For example, according to al-Ṣūlī, Ibn Khalāf's slave was found with a Muslim woman in 937:

A Jew was found with a Muslim woman. This Jew was a slave (*ghulām*) to the Jewish *jahbadh* Ibn Khalāf. The chief of police flogged him in the presence of the Jew one Friday. The city was scandalized/captivated by this, as the affair was repugnant [*qabīḥ*].<sup>26</sup>

Yet notably, while this incident “scandalized” the city, it did not negatively alter the position of Ibn Khalāf, who Bajkam appointed as his secretary one year later.

Instead, to the extent that there was a category that defined most Jewish officials during this period, it was not their religion, but their profession as *tujjār* (great merchants). As Mottahadeh explains, the *tujjār* were a relatively small, identifiable group of individuals within a given city who held (or were assumed to hold) significant financial resources. The position brought with it prestige. The “leading merchants” (*wujūh al-tujjār*) were considered one of the most important social groups within a given city. After all, they functioned as something of a

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<sup>23</sup> al-Ṣūlī, *Akhbār al-Rāḍī bi'allāh wa'l-Mutaqqī bi'allāh*, ed. J. Heyworth Dunne (London, 1935), 103. Miskawayh, *Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate*, Vol. I, 384. Translation: Vol. IV, 433-34.

<sup>24</sup> al-Ṣūlī, *Akhbār*, 128-129.

<sup>25</sup> al-Rudhawārī, *Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate*, Vol. III., 149-150; Translation: Vol. VI, 155-156.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Ṣūlī, *Akhbār*, 108. Trans. Canard, I, 176. About 150 years later, the Sunni jurist Ibn al-Jawzī reported that the Jewish banker then did not rest until he had the chief of police flogged in front of the Jews in retaliation. Unlike al-Ṣūlī, however, Ibn al-Jawzī was not a contemporary of Ibn Khalāf. Moreover, Ibn al-Jawzī wrote during a time when jurists were increasingly questioning the role of *dhimmīs* in Muslim administrations, so his version of the story may also have served as a polemic against the tyranny of *dhimmī* officials. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓām*, VI, 293.

long-distance credit network, whose access to capital was necessary to pay the army and other expenses. As a result, a leader required their loyalty in order to govern effectively. In fact, Bajkam had even consulted the leading merchants about whom to appoint as caliph to ensure that his choice would be accepted unanimously by the population, thus solidifying his rule.<sup>27</sup> It is unclear if non-Muslims would have been consulted in this capacity, but the anecdote certainly speaks to the high status of the *tujjār* during this period. At the same time, conquerors who needed to pay the army quickly, or leaders who were unable to pay back their debts, did not hesitate to raid, torture, or otherwise oppress the *tujjār* in order to do so.

## Raids

In contrast to Al-Muqtadir's Jewish court bankers who occupied a liminal status vis à vis the world of the Abbasid court, subsequent generations of Jewish courtiers did not necessarily hold their positions for life. Instead, their fates were bound up with the fates of the political officials with whom they allied themselves. Throughout the Buyid era, strongmen rose and fell, and those loyal to them, including individual Jews, rose and fell alongside them.

Rival officials under each military commander jockeyed for power, conspiring against each other and orchestrating each other's downfalls. For example, in 938, Bajkam's vizier, Ḥasan b. 'Abd-allah, convinced Bajkam that his Jewish secretary, 'Alī b. Khalāf b. Tayāb, had stolen 100,000 dinars from him in Mosul. Bajkam arrested 'Alī b. Khalāf and his brother, and he appointed the Muslim Ibn Shīrzād in his place.<sup>28</sup> Yet there was nothing distinctly anti-Jewish

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<sup>27</sup> Mottahadeh, *Loyalty and Leadership*, 117-119.

about this action, necessarily. The effect of the downfall of ‘Alī b. Khalāf was an elevation in the status of Ibn Shīrẓād’s personal *jahbadh*, the Jew ‘Alī b. Hārūn.

Nevertheless, during difficult times, Buyid rulers often seized the assets of their own officials and the individuals loyal to them, torturing and imprisoning them in order to make up their debts. According to al-Ṣūlī, just a few years after he had appointed Ibn Shīrẓād as his secretary,

Bajkam convened the secretaries to make them establish the budget of income in the different provinces. But it was a trick, because when they joined together he arrested Ibn Shīrẓād and his family ... as well as the Jewish banker ‘Alī b. Hārūn.<sup>29</sup>

Bajkam then seized the property of all of the secretaries that he had just arrested. According to al-Ṣūlī, “[h]e took from the Jew ‘Alī b. Hārūn, after having subjected him to terrible torture, 110,000 dinars; Then, Bajkam killed him after that.”<sup>30</sup>

Officials often raided wealthy traders to pay back their loans; many of these traders were Jews. For example, according to Abu Shujā’, the Buyid ruler Baha al-Dawla found himself impoverished in 996. He wrote to three of his courtiers “requesting them to furnish him with clothing and other things.” Only one of the three followers, Abu ‘Alī b. Isma’il, “obtained what was requested after demanding from a Jew, Abu ‘Alī b. Faḍlān,<sup>31</sup> a loan for which compensation was provided, but he [Abu ‘Alī b. Isma’il] did not comply with his [Ibn Faḍlān’s] wishes,” by granting Ibn Faḍlān the promised compensation. The courtier then went to Baha al-Dawla with

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<sup>29</sup>al-Ṣūlī, *Akhbār*, 147, lines 8-12; Translation: Canard, I, 229.

<sup>30</sup> al-Ṣūlī, *Akhbār*, 148. Translation: Canard, I, 231.

<sup>31</sup> Ibn Faḍlān was probably a descendant of Bishr b. Aharon, a Jewish court banker who served al-Muqtadir and one of the “sons of Aaron” referred to by Sa’adya. A geniza letter written by Ḥayya Gaon asks Elḥanan b. Shemarya in Fustat to assist a certain Abu al-Faḍl Yosef b. Bishr in claiming his property in Fustat. Ḥayya explains that Abu al-Faḍl “comes from prestige in Baghdad, of nobility among its elders,” and he wrote the name Faḍl in Arabic characters, suggesting that he was from a family of court bankers. Because of the custom of naming first-born sons after their paternal grandfathers, Abu al-Faḍl and Ibn Faḍlān are very likely the same person. See T-S 10 J 27.10, Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, Doc. 39. The Jewish Ibn Faḍlān family is referenced in Arabic chronicles throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

the goods that he had requested, and Baha al-Dawla was impressed. Then, probably to avoid needing to pay compensation to Ibn Faḍlān, “[t]he two agreed to assail the Jews and exact a fine from them. ... Abu ‘Alī b. Isma‘il went back to Baghdad with these instructions; when he got there he arrested a number of Jews and treated them unjustly, with punishment and torture.”<sup>32</sup> Although Ibn Faḍlān had provided a loan as promised, this did little to secure his own position or that of his co-religionists.

In all of these cases, however, Jewish courtiers were not singled out as Jews. In describing his downfall at the hands of his rival, Ibn al-Miskawayh did not even mention ‘Alī b. Khalāf’s Jewish identity, and ‘Alī b. Khalāf’s downfall had led to the (albeit temporary) elevation of Ibn Shīrẓād’s Jewish *jahbadh* ‘Alī b. Harūn. When Bajkam needed funds to pay his debts, however, he did not hesitate to arrest the wealthy men under him, regardless of their religion. Jews suffered because they were bound up in a social order in which power was ephemeral.

#### Characterization of Jewish Officials in Buyid-Era Historiography

In fact, contemporaneous Muslim chroniclers characterized Jewish officials in positive terms and condemned the raiding of wealthy men, regardless of religion. In order to understand this, it is necessary to understand who, precisely, the chroniclers of this period were. Most served as secretaries to viziers at Buyid courts; as a result, they viewed the process of governing firsthand. As Joel Kraemer has argued, historians of the Buyid period emphasized their professional affiliation as secretaries, clerks, and philosophers over their religious identity, and their historical writings are “tonally and thematically secular.” They characterized history writing

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<sup>32</sup> al-Rudhrawarī, *Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate*, Vol. III, 282; Translation, Vol. VI, 300-301.



as “philosophy teaching by example,” and their narratives served to “record the experiences of nations so that men (mainly rulers and government officials) might derive lessons from the examples that recur in history.”<sup>33</sup> In their narratives, the practice of raiding wealthy men, particularly *dhimmīs*, was antithetical to good governance.

For example, according to the chronicler al-Ṣulī, in 933, al-Barīdī needed to raise a large one hundred thousand dinars to pay his army in order to capture Baghdad. In order to do this, al-Ṣulī explained, al-Barīdī “assailed the Jews, who were the bulk of the traders; by outdoing every known form of outrage he made up the hundred thousand dinars.”<sup>34</sup> Eight years later, al-Ṣulī reports that al-Barīdī entered Baghdad, and “[g]reat oppression and strong beatings befell the traders in Baghdad, and the people fled. A group of wealthy Jews and Zoroastrians left Baghdad, for al-Shām.”<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the chronicler Ibn al-Miskawayh also condemned al-Barīdī’s actions as inherently oppressive:

Prices rose high in Baghdad, and al-Barīdī oppressed the people in the way that he and his family was known for. He captured the *kharāj* in March. He thus ruined the farmers who fled; and he started collecting the poll tax, trampling on the ‘*ahl al-dhimma*. He set the weak against the strong.”<sup>36</sup>

In these narratives, the incessant raids constitute the antithesis of good governance. For Ibn al-Miskawayh, a ruler could only be successful if he avoided such unseemly behavior. Thus, according to al-Miskawayh, when Abu Zakariyya Yahyā b. Sā ‘id realized that Bajkam wanted to conquer Baghdad in 937, he wrote him a letter to warn that his rule would never be considered legitimate unless he ceased his incessant raids:

Prince, you are a candidate for sovereignty and aspire to the service of the Caliphate. Do you imprison ruined men who have been despoiled of their fortunes and demand money of them in a strange town, ordering them to be tortured? Only yesterday a

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<sup>33</sup> Kraemer, *Humanism*, 210, 228.

<sup>34</sup> Al-Ṣulī, *Akhhbār*, 251, lines 12-13.

<sup>35</sup> Al-Ṣulī, *Akhhbār*, 279.

<sup>36</sup> Ibn Miskawayh, *Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate*, Vol. II, 25; Trans. Vol. V, 27.

plate containing hot coals was placed on the stomach of Sahl b. Naẓīr the collector. Do not you know that when people hear of this, they will be set against you and it will provoke the animosity and the active hostility of those who do not as yet know your name, not to mention those who have realized this conduct of yours?... Remember that this is Baghdad, the seat of the Caliphate, not Rayy or Isfahan, and it will not put up with such behavior.<sup>37</sup>

The unfortunate Sahl b. Naẓīr, who had hot coals placed on his stomach, was Jewish. Yet the letter writer did not consider Sahl's Jewish identity or even his affiliation with Bajkam's enemy, Al-Baridī, relevant to his argument. He condemned Bajkam's raids and torture of rich men to extract funds (regardless of their religious identity), and he argued that the population would not respect someone who engaged in such unseemly practices. According to Ibn Miskawayh, Bajkam heeded Abu Zakariyya's advice. He released the people that he had imprisoned, and he appointed Abu Zakariyya Yaḥyā b. Sā 'id as his advisor. The caliph later appointed Bajkam as *amīr al-umarā'* in Baghdad, a position he held until his death.

By contrast, according to Ibn Miskawayh, the Buyid *amīr* 'Izz al-Dawla known as Bakhtiyār (r. 967-978), was notorious for his oppressive raids on Muslims and *dhimmīs* alike. When he found himself impoverished,

Bakhtiyār turned in quest of money to reprehensible sources, which it would be unseemly to describe, and which are illicit according to all religions. The story that the caliph had been fined spread in Baghdad among high and low. ... The vizier ... depended for the sums which he required for the pay of the troops and the maintenance of the retinue and dependents of the courts, which he had to find, upon fines which he inflicted on the subjects and the traders, and extortion by chicanery. He began with the *ahl al-dhimma*, then proceeded to adherents of the faith and appropriated the goods of the professional witnesses (*shahūd*) and leading citizens, of the respectable sort; he also employed a gang of informers and accusers whom he styled Agents and whom he paid regular stipends. Prayers were offered against him in the Public Mosques, churches and synagogues, meeting places and assembly rooms.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Miskawayh, *Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate*, Vol. I, 379; Trans., Vol. IV, 427.

<sup>38</sup> al-Rudhrawārī, *Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate*, Vol. III, 307-308; Trans., Vol. VI, 329-331.

Similarly, in this account, Bakhtiyār's raids may have begun with the singling out of *dhimmīs*, but ultimately targeted all segments of the population. Eventually, Bakhtiyār was overthrown by his cousin, 'Adūd al-Dawla. This narrative was intended to contrast the unjust nature of Bakhtiyār's rule with the moral reign of his successor.

Overall, during the Buyid period Muslim chroniclers condemned the oppression of *dhimmī* officials as antithetical to good governance. In their narratives, they used accusations of oppressive tax farming and raids to discredit the legitimacy of a given ruler. Moreover, they worried that a ruler who arbitrarily raided *dhimmī* officials would go on to oppress the community of Muslim believers. Regardless of the veracity of many of these accounts, they demonstrate both the instability of the social, legal, and political order during the Buyid period and the relative integration of Jewish officials in elite Buyid courtly circles.

## **Part II: The Trans-Mediterranean Yeshiva in the Absence of Empire**

During the period of united Abbasid rule, the Babylonian yeshivot rose to prominence due to their relations with a strong centralized state as mediated through Jewish *jahbadhs*. By the middle of the tenth century, however, the political apparatus of the Abbasid Empire on which the court bankers and the yeshivot had risen to power ceased to exist. On the other hand, as the previous section demonstrated, there was a greater degree of social mobility during this period of political fragmentation than under the united caliphate. Many Jewish officials held relatively high-level positions in provincial Buyid courts and engaged in correspondence with prominent Muslim and Christian political officials. Although these positions did not bring with them the same security as those of Al-Muqtadir's court bankers—*jahbadhs* and traders were often subject

to raids during the Buyid period when there was shortfall in a given province's budget—such raids were universally condemned by Muslim elites.

It is difficult to say much about the operations of the yeshivot within Baghdad or Iraq during this period due to the lack of surviving source material. Nevertheless, the Cairo Geniza preserved a great deal of correspondence between the Babylonian yeshivot of Baghdad and Jewish communities and individuals in Fatimid Egypt and North Africa from the Buyid era. These letters offer insight into the ways in which the yeshivot related to their followers outside of Iraq during this period of political fragmentation and economic uncertainty. They demonstrate that, in the absence of a centralized state, the yeshivot continued to rely on networks of long-distance merchants to transport letters, documents, donations, and other writings from Baghdad to and Egypt, and even as far west as Qayrawan and al-Andalus. As the exchange of letters across long distances became more central to the rule and operations of the Babylonian yeshivot, both the physical form and linguistic rhetoric of their letters became more elaborate and standardized. Through the composition of letters, the geonim, like contemporaneous Buyid elites, fostered a wide-ranging network of relationships with individuals across the region, both those who accepted their claims to halakhic authority and those who did not, such as Karaite Jews. They performed favors for each other, and in this way, even in the absence of a centralized state, affiliation with the Babylonian yeshivot still yielded concrete benefits for individuals who traveled between these regions.

#### Yeshiva Network between East and West

How did the Babylonian yeshivot maintain and even strengthen their relations with communities in North Africa during the Buyid period, when they were no longer united in the

same political realm? It turns out that political “borders” during this period were rather fluid. Neither the Fatimids nor the Buyids accepted each other’s claims to authority, and they employed spies and missionized in each other’s territories.<sup>39</sup> As Jessica Goldberg’s analysis of the geography of Geniza merchants demonstrates, mercantile routes and networks in the Islamic world were not circumscribed by political borders during this period.<sup>40</sup> Itinerant merchants had always played a role in ancient Near Eastern communication networks and, in the absence of an imperial *barīd*, or postal system traversing Persia, Iraq, and North Africa, political and religious elites harnessed the power of commercial mercantile networks to communicate across long distances.<sup>41</sup>

The yeshivot cultivated close relations with the many individuals across the Mediterranean who oversaw these long-distance mercantile networks. Although the yeshivot may not have been able to rely on income from their landholdings or from court bankers in Baghdad in the same way as they had in the past, these mercantile networks ensured that the geonim could continue to appeal to their followers abroad for monetary support. Individuals and communities far from Baghdad were able to transmit donations to the yeshivot through long-distance mercantile networks using letters of credit (*suftaja*). By maintaining and strengthening relations with many different individuals and communities across the Mediterranean, the yeshivot could ensure that the arbitrary raid of a single wealthy patron would not have devastating effects on the yeshivot as a whole.

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<sup>39</sup> Farhad Daftary, “The Ismaili Da‘awa Outside the Fatimid Dawla,” in *L’Egypte Fatimide: Son Art et Son Histoire*, ed. Marianne Barrucand, (Paris: Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne), 29-43.

<sup>40</sup> Jessica Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 304.

<sup>41</sup> Adam Silverstein, *Postal Systems in the Pre-Modern Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 116-21.

How, exactly, did the yeshivot make use of these networks? Although we do not have evidence for how they communicated with their followers within Iraq, Persia, and the Levant, the Geniza documents offer a window into the relations between the yeshivot in Baghdad and their followers in Egypt and other parts of North Africa. The Geniza preserved seven original letters, complete with postal instructions on the verso, sent from the Babylonian yeshivot to Fustat, Egypt between 972 and 1040.<sup>42</sup> All but one of the letters include postal instructions written in Arabic script, listing the name of the recipient, blessings on him, and his place of residence (Fustat or Egypt).<sup>43</sup> The use of Arabic script suggests that non-Jewish couriers often transported these letters.<sup>44</sup>

The Geniza evidence also suggests that the Babylonian geonim were unable to transmit letters directly from Baghdad to points west of Fustat.<sup>45</sup> Instead, they relied on their compatriots within Fustat to transmit the letter to its intended recipient. Thus, if the gaon needed to contact one of his affiliates west of Egypt, he needed to transmit a letter through an associate in Egypt to the community or individual in question. For example, when a rather large sum of donations went missing en route from Qayrawan to Baghdad, Hayya wrote to his compatriots, Avraham and Tanhum, sons of Ya 'aqov of Fez, to ask for their help in tracking down the monies. But in order to do so, he needed to first send the letter to a compatriot in Fustat. He informed the brothers that he had sent the letter at the hand of a certain Abu al-Tayyib Mar Rav 'Amran Ha-Levi, along with the answers to three *she'elot* that had been sent with the brothers' previous

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<sup>42</sup> Sherira Gaon: T-S AS 148.49; T-S AS 146.279; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, docs. 21, 26; Hayya Gaon: T-S 10J27.10; Mosseri VII 157 (L 225); Mosseri I a 5 (L2); Mosseri III 206 (L 279); Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, docs. 39, 40, 41, 45; Shemu'el b. Hofni: T-S Loan 169; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 56.

<sup>43</sup> Mosseri VII 157 (L 225); Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 40.

<sup>44</sup> Goitein, *Mediterranean Society* Vol. I, 284.

<sup>45</sup> Cf., Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions*, 309-310.

letter. The Arabic postal marks on the letter indicate that it was sent from Fustat to the two brothers, not from Baghdad directly.<sup>46</sup>

In the late-tenth and first half of the eleventh century, two wealthy families of Iraqi origin, the Tustarīs and the Ibn ‘Awkals, operated long-distance trading networks stretching from Persia westward to al-Andalus.<sup>47</sup> The Babylonian yeshivot cultivated close relations with members of both of these networks, although it was the Ibn ‘Awqal family of Rabbanites who took the lead in facilitating the transportation of letters, responsa, texts, and donations between the yeshivot and their followers across the Mediterranean. Ya ‘aqov b. ‘Awqal had studied at the Yeshiva of Pumbedita in Baghdad and was granted the title of *Resh Kallah*. The beginnings of two letters of Sherira Gaon and Hayya b. Sherira (when he was Av Beit Din) addressed to Ya‘aqov ibn ‘Awkal have been preserved in the Cairo Geniza.<sup>48</sup> In one letter, Ibn ‘Awkal is referred to in Hebrew as the “treasurer (*gizbar*) of the holy yeshiva,” likely due to his role in overseeing, transmitting, and regulating the donations sent to the various members of the yeshivot.<sup>49</sup>

Geniza evidence indicates that Ibn ‘Awkal’s network supervised the transmission of *she’elot* and donations sent from major cities in North Africa to Baghdad. For example, around the year 1000, Ya ‘aqov b. Nissim of Qayrawan wrote to the men of Qābes, North Africa, regarding the transmission of their halakhic queries intended for the yeshivot in Baghdad. The men of Qabes had apparently sent their *she’elot* to Qayrawan with a group of messengers who traveled regularly between the two cities, as the *she’elot* arrived on Erev Shabbat at sunset. Ya ‘aqov b. Nissim wrote that he sent back to Qabes some 800 collections of letters with the same

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<sup>46</sup> T-S12.829v, l.; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc.38.

<sup>47</sup> Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions*, 309-310.

<sup>48</sup> Mosseri IV 6; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, docs. 33, 34.

<sup>49</sup> T-S 16.62r, l.17-18; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 36.

group of messengers, and, not too soon after that, transmitted another letter to Qabes with a certain Menahem, an affiliate of the yeshiva from the Land of Israel.<sup>50</sup>

Yet these messengers did not travel beyond Qayrawan. Instead, Ya‘aqov b. Nissim, based in Qayrawan, needed to send the *she ’ilot* from Qabes to Ibn ‘Awkal in order for them to be sent to the yeshiva in Baghdad:

I transmitted a letter to our beloved (*ahuv*) Abū Bishr [Ya ‘aqov b. Yosef ibn ‘Awkal] Treasurer of the Holy Yeshiva, and I told him...about everything, and I attached your questions to the letters...He assured me that they would arrive in peace, and their answers will come soon from now.<sup>51</sup>

Despite the over four thousand kilometers separating Qayrawan and Baghdad, Ibn ‘Awkal assured Ya‘aqov b. Nissim that the *she ’ilot* would arrive in Baghdad safely and that their answers would arrive soon. Although Baghdad, Egypt, and North Africa had ceased to be connected in the same political realm, yeshiva affiliates were still able to rely on wealthy merchants and mercantile networks to transport texts and donations safely and efficiently across long distances.

Ya ‘aqov b. ‘Awkal’s son, Yosef, resided in Cairo and, based on his surviving letters found in the Cairo Geniza, oriented the bulk of the family’s trade westward towards Ifrīqiyya.<sup>52</sup> In doing so, he became extremely wealthy, one of the wealthiest merchants represented in the Cairo Geniza corpus. Yusuf nevertheless also maintained his family’s affiliation with the Babylonian yeshivot, and he was styled with the title of *Alluf* of the Yeshiva. Through their continued affiliation with Yosef b. ‘Awkal, the yeshivot in Baghdad were able to maintain and strengthen their connections with communities in North Africa even after the death of his father. Yosef b. ‘Awkal wrote regularly to the yeshivot in Baghdad, informing them of letters,

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions*, 310.



donations, and *she'elot* that they should expect to receive. As a result of this information, the geonim were able to write to their affiliates abroad and compel them to track down donations and texts that had apparently gone missing. For example, in a letter from 1007, Hayya Gaon wrote to his compatriots, the brothers Avraham and Tanhum b. Ya'aqov of Fez:

A few days ago a letter appeared before us from the darling of our eye, Abu al-Faraj [Yosef b. Ya'qov b. 'Awqal] *Alluf*, may god make permanent his strength, and he told us that he had sent a *she'ila* and was requesting its answer, but it never arrived to us...He told me about 70 dinars that Rabbi Khaluf b. R. Yosef z"l sent from Ajmāt, but we have not heard any news about them... By God, our friends, do the best that you can in seeing to this [matter] day and night; and do not neglect it... This matter is the most important of your deeds on the path to divine reward (*thuwāb*)...I am begging you to let me know who to trust in Qayrawan.<sup>53</sup>

Hayya wrote this letter soon after the deaths of both his own father, Sherira, the former Gaon, and the yeshiva's main contact in Qayrawan, Ya'aqov b. Nissim. The letter suggests that the breakdown in communications might have been due to the instability caused by the deaths of these prominent men, a situation that Hayya characterized as "the greatest of tragedies." Still, the letter speaks to the strength of the trans-Mediterranean network of individuals loyal to the yeshiva that Hayya and Sherira had cultivated. Even after the death of the yeshiva's main contacts in Qayrawan, Hayya was still able to call on others loyal to the institution to track down the missing monies and letters. In doing so, he characterized this service to the yeshiva as a divine obligation.

Ibn 'Awkal was not always a reliable messenger, however. In the early eleventh century, when Yūsuf b. 'Awkal either neglected or was unable to deliver correspondence from the yeshiva, the geonim also sent letters and responsa to their followers using the long-distance mercantile networks operated by the Tustarīs. This is attested to in a letter from two brothers in Qayrawan (the sons of Berekhya) to Yūsuf b. 'Awkal around 1007. In a previous letter, Ibn

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<sup>53</sup> T-S 12.829r, l.9ff. Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 38.

ʿAwkal had written to his representative in Qayrawan, Abū ʿImrān al-Majjānī, to inform him that he had sent Sherira and Hayya’s letters to Qayrawan with someone he trusted, but according to the brothers, the letters never arrived. Their connections with the Babylonian yeshivot would likely have been severed “were it not for the fact that God ... granted that a letter should arrive from my lord Hayya ... via the Tustarīs.” In his letter, Hayya informed the brothers that he had not heard from them for five years, thus suggesting that Ibn ʿAwkal had not been transporting their communication as promised.<sup>54</sup> Regardless of why Ibn ʿAwkal might have neglected his duties to the yeshivot, Sherira and Hayya Gaon’s cultivated relations with other different long-distance mercantile networks ensured that they were able to maintain contact with their followers far from Baghdad.

Despite the political instability of the Buyid period and the frequency of raids against Jewish officials, the geonim and their followers retained a degree of trust in the integrity and security of this transportation system. On the one hand, they took precautions to ensure that they did not have to rely on a single individual or network to transport letters, texts, and donations on their behalf. On the other hand, in the event that correspondence to or from the yeshiva did not arrive as promised, the geonim and their followers almost always blamed the messenger and assumed that foul play was involved—often, on the part of the gaon’s rivals within the yeshiva itself. This is because, throughout the second half of the tenth century, yeshiva officials in Baghdad continued to fight each other over the distribution of income. Instead of waging intra-yeshiva battles through the channels of the Abbasid court as they once had, they now waged these battles through fierce letter-writing campaigns to yeshiva affiliates abroad. They

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<sup>54</sup> T-S12.175. Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 150. On this translation and for a discussion of the significance of the Babylonian Rabbanites’ use of Karaite mercantile networks in promoting their own authority, see Marina Rustow, *Heresy and the Politics of Community: The Jews of the Fatimid Caliphate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 145-7.

complained that others within the yeshivot had stolen funds intended for them, and they tried to command a monopoly of the incoming donations for a given faction.

When Neḥemiah became Gaon of Pumbedita in 960, the previous Gaon, Aharon b. Sarjādo, and his followers, including a certain Naḥshon and Sherira b. Ḥanina, refused to recognize his authority. Sherira even maintained his own counter-yeshiva. Without access to centralized state power, Neḥemya, Ibn Sarjādo, and Sherira instead appealed to Jews living abroad for support for their specific factions. In 960, Neḥemya wrote to communities of Jews outside of Baghdad to warn them against supporting Ibn Sargado. In his letters to Fustat, he characterized Ibn Sarjādo as an evil man who transgressed Jewish law in the worst ways possible:

How can you forget us and abandon us and crush our hearts, for this Khalāf b. Sarjādo, the evil one whose evils are notorious, and whose lies and falsehoods and deceptions have been exposed to all! It is not just that he stole for himself the donations that came to the scholars, but even more than that, he consumes what is designated for orphans and the poor, and he [informs] on us to the authorities!<sup>55</sup>

In subsequent letters, Neḥemya continued to exhort his followers to avoid assisting Ibn Sarjādo in any way by even opening his letters. In 963, he admonished the Babylonian community of Fustat:

Do not be led astray by the stupidity ... of ‘Kakhshon’ and ‘Shevira’ [puns on the names of Nakhshon and Sherira, from the roots meaning “to deceive” and “to break”], and do not help any man open their letters or reply to their letters, and do not read them for us. And any man that has a question or a desire, he should send with you [so that it will] come before us.<sup>56</sup>

Sherira officially became gaon after Neḥemya’s death in 968, but the members of Neḥemya’s faction refused to accept his authority. Shemu ’el b. Ḥofnī, Neḥemya’s nephew,

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<sup>55</sup> Mosseri VIII 479; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 14.

<sup>56</sup> T-S8J20.3; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 17.

presided over his own “school.”<sup>57</sup> In a letter from 977, he complained that donations and *she'elot* intended for his faction by Shemarya b. Elhanan were instead sent “in the name of the other person” (meaning Sherira), “and we [Shemu'el's faction] were not remembered, nor did we receive a portion ... of the righteous man's donations.”<sup>58</sup> Instead, Shmu'el bemoaned, the messenger “assigned them to one of the scholars who has assumed authority.”<sup>59</sup> None of these letters make any reference to the possibility of appealing to government officials, either within Baghdad or abroad. Instead, they ask their followers to earmark *she'elot* and donations and to make sure that they were transported by and delivered to affiliates of the correct faction of the yeshiva.

In the 980s, the yeshiva of Sura re-opened under Şemaḥ Şedeq, and Shemu'el b. Hofni assumed the title of Gaon of Sura in 999. The fighting over donations continued until the two yeshivot reached an agreement with one another regarding the distribution of donations that came to Baghdad: they would ask communities to earmark donations for a specific yeshiva; any money that was not specifically earmarked was divided equally between the two yeshivot. To symbolize the new peace between the warring families, Hayya, then Av Beit Din, married Shemu'el b. Hofni's daughter. Shemu'el described this agreement in Hebrew in a letter from 1008 to Qayrawan:

Complete peace was made between us and our Lord and Master Sherira Gaon...and with the Gaon his son [Hayya], for his son married our daughter and a contract was composed between us, stating that all the donations arriving in the name of each of us would be for himself, none other participating; and if non-earmarked donations arrived, or if they were without specification or were in the name of scholars of the yeshiva, they would be divided, half for us and half for our son-in-law.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Jacob Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature* Vol. I (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1931), 147.

<sup>58</sup> BM Or. 5538 I; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 47.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> BM Or 5552 Ev, l.4-11; Gil *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 52.

In another letter, Shmu 'el explained that this agreement symbolically joined the two yeshivot as one:

The elders of our yeshiva assembled together with the elders from his place and made peace between them and us, and also with the Gaon, his son and our son-in-law; our shield was consolidated; the three of us were as one.<sup>61</sup>

Under united Abbasid rule, the government enforced the boundaries between rival Jewish officials. In Shmu 'el's letter, however, the state itself was irrelevant. The agreement involved connecting Sherira's family and Shemu 'el's family through marriage to ensure that the bond between the two families would last beyond a single generation.<sup>62</sup>

Still, this agreement between officials within Baghdad did not guarantee that letters and donations sent between Baghdad and the Mediterranean would be sent to their intended recipients. This breakdown in communications, however, was cause for alarm. When the individual responsible was discovered, he was subject to heavy sanctions to deter others. For example, the Babylonian community of Fustat reported that, for three years, they did not send donations to the yeshiva because they needed the money to rebuild the synagogue in Fustat, likely after its destruction at the hands of the Fatimid caliph al-Ḥākim. The situation had been so desperate that they even used some funds set aside for the ransoming of captives in order to rebuild. Even during this period, they continued to write letters to the yeshiva in Baghdad and await the gaon's reply. As they explained in a letter from 1025, the yeshiva's reply never arrived:

We sent this letter to the presence of the Gaon, may he live forever, at the hand of Mar' Aṭāf Ha-Levy b. Tov (May he rest in Eden), We apologized for the lateness of the renewing of the *al-Akhmās* (the fifths, the donations) in entirety. We built the synagogue, may Allah protect it, and in doing so took from the ransomed prisoners

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<sup>61</sup> T-S 12.99v, 1.12-14, Gil *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 53.

<sup>62</sup> Hayya, however, appears to have died childless, suggesting that the dynasty was unable to sustain itself. Nevertheless, as Chapter 3 will explain, the two yeshivot did unite in the middle of the eleventh century. The Exilarch Ḥezekiah presided over the new beginning around 1040. For the next 200 years, it appears that only one yeshiva functioned in Baghdad.

a large sum. Nevertheless, we told you of our longing and waiting for arrivals of the letters of His Presence (Hayya Gaon), may God exalt him.<sup>63</sup>

Three years later, the community figured out why they had never received the gaon's response.

The gaon's letter had been delivered first to a certain Rav Avraham Baḥir ha-Yeshiva, but when he sent the letter on to the community in Fustat with another messenger, it never arrived.<sup>64</sup>

Having identified the messenger who failed to deliver the letters as promised, the Babylonians in Fustat sought to avoid the problem again. They suggested that the yeshiva in Baghdad flog the official in the presence of the entire yeshiva to dissuade others from negligence:

Today is three years but we were told that here is the one who took the letters that we received. So we ask our Gaon to brand him in the presence of the yeshiva, vigorously with clubs, the one who does this and plotted this. Write to us when you do this so that we will also do it, since this will be a great benefit.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, even in the absence of a single polity connecting Iraq, Egypt, and other parts of North Africa, the yeshivot were able to harness the power and integrity of long-distance mercantile networks to communicate with and solicit donations from individuals and communities far from Baghdad. Most significantly, the network of yeshiva-affiliated individuals and communities assumed that their correspondence would be delivered to the intended recipient. If not, they almost always assumed foul play. They called on other individuals in their network to investigate, and, when they determined the guilty party responsible for the missing letters, they imposed a heavy punishment.

## Epistolary Practices

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<sup>63</sup> T-S 16.318r, l.15-18; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 43.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. "The letter of our gaon arrived to our mighty and great Ḥaber the *Alluf* Mar Rav Avraham Baḥir ha-yeshiva, who sent the letter to the community, but it did not arrive."

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., l. 19-21.

During the Buyid era, in the absence of concrete confessional and political borders, the exchange of letters took on an increased significance. Maurice Pomerantz argues that, for Arabic-speaking Muslim elites, letters aspired to re-constitute an idealized past, a world order governed according to Islamic principles and just authority.<sup>66</sup> The rules governing the composition of epistolary prose also served as a way to inscribe and preserve the boundaries between different strata of society. The composition and transmission of letters came to serve a similar function for the yeshivot, which were in a similar period of transition.

Throughout this period, the geonim emphasized the importance of scribes in the yeshiva hierarchy. In the second half of the tenth century, geonim began extending greetings on behalf of the *sofer*, or scribe of the yeshiva, a Hebrew equivalent of the Arabic *kātib*, or secretary. The *sofer* was responsible for the composition and copying of letters. He ensured that their contents were eloquent, understandable, and in keeping with legal principles. In the new yeshiva hierarchy developing at the end of the tenth century, the *sofer* was a privileged position held by the son of the current Gaon. In fact, both Hayya b. Sherira Gaon and Yisra'el b. Shmu'el b. Ḥofni Gaon served as scribes for their respective fathers, and they identified themselves as such in the letters that they drafted.

The yeshiva scribes increasingly modeled the physical form of their documents on contemporaneous Abbasid and Buyid chancery practices. For example, just as a new form of cursive Arabic script had developed in the tenth century, so too did yeshiva-affiliated scribes in the chancery of Neḥemya Gaon in the 960s develop a distinct calligraphic cursive documentary Hebrew script. This script was used by most subsequent geonim.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, yeshiva scribes

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<sup>66</sup> Pomerantz, "Licit Magic and Divine Grace," 199.

<sup>67</sup> Judith Olszowy-Schlanger, "Early Babylonian 'Documentary' Script: Diplomatic and Palaeographical Study of Two Geonic Letters from the British Library Cairo Geniza Collection," in *Manuscripts Hebreux et Arabes: Melanges En L'Honneur de Collette Sirat*, ed. Nicholas de Lange & Judith Olszowy-Schlanger, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014),

wrote the name of the Gaon sending the letter on a single line, echoing the use of *tarjamas*, or headings, in Abbasid (and later Fatimid) petitions, in which the name of the sender was also written as a header, separate from the body of the text.<sup>68</sup> The vast majority of original geonic letters contain large spaces between lines and a large margin on the left, echoing the style of extant Fatimid documents. The yeshiva scribes made sure to leave the verso mostly blank, so that a letter could be folded up in such a way that the writing of the letter was concealed on the inside. Thus, even in letters complaining of their abject poverty, the geonim distinguished their letters from mundane mercantile correspondence through their wanton use of paper. Their use of royal diplomatics emphasized the continued prestige of their institutions even in the absence of a formal relationship with a centralized state.

Yeshiva scribes also came to apply such elements of Arabic epistolary prose as puns and rhyming couplets to the Hebrew prose of the yeshiva's correspondence.<sup>69</sup> In so doing, they developed a uniquely Jewish "Rabbanite" register of epistolary, replete with quotations from the Hebrew Bible, Mishnah, and Talmud that emphasized the eloquence of Hebrew above the literal meaning of the text.<sup>70</sup> The influence of Buyid epistolary prose is particularly apparent in the

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179. There was nothing particularly "ideological" about the use of cursive script. Scribes in the chancery of Nehemiah Gaon wrote letters in both square letters and cursive letters, and the yeshiva's deputies abroad, many of whom were likely trained in the west, continued to use square letters into the middle of the eleventh century.

<sup>68</sup> S. M. Stern, "Three Petitions of the Fatimid Period," *Oriens* 15 (1962), 190-191. Many Abbasid administrative practices originated in the East and spread westward, so it is likely that the use of *tarjamas* was originally associated with Abbasid courts in the eastern parts of the caliphate.

<sup>69</sup> This is not surprising. The geonim had been writing letters in Hebrew for centuries. They tended to employ Arabic for literary genres in which they had no previous experience, works of philosophy, theology, and grammar, as well as more mundane business correspondence. This is comparable to the process by which Jews developed medieval Hebrew poetry according to the meter of the Arabic *qaṣīda*. See Rina Drory, *Models and Contacts: Arabic Literature and its Impact on Medieval Jewish Culture* Vol. 25 (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

<sup>70</sup> Ben Outhwaite has brought attention to the prominence of literary Hebrew in the letters of the eleventh-century Palestinian Gaon, Shelomo b. Yehudah. Three-fifths of his surviving correspondence is in Hebrew, not his spoken language of Arabic. Outhwaite suggests that this is because geonic letters were read out loud in the synagogue, where Hebrew was the only acceptable language. See B. Outhwaite, "Lines of Communication: Medieval Hebrew Letters of the Eleventh Century," *Scribes as Agents of Language Change*, ed. Esther-Miriam Wagner et al., (Boston: De Gruyter, 2013): 183-198.



flowery, literary, Hebrew introductions that preceded nearly every letter exchanged between yeshiva affiliates. The geonim and their followers made sure to preface nearly all of their letters with a Hebrew introduction, including those whose body was in Judeo-Arabic. For example, the Babylonian community of Fustat addressed Hayya Gaon with the following rhyming couplets in Hebrew in the introduction to a Judeo-Arabic letter:

*Li-Kavod Yaqar Haderet/ Fi'ar Şafiret/Gadulet Segulet/ Dagelet Qadesheth  
/Yashishet Qashishet Marenu V'Rabeinu Hayya Gaon Kol Yisra'el*<sup>71</sup>

To the honored, dear presence of the glory of the great treasured siren, the holy, ancient, venerable banner of our master and Rabbi Hayya, Gaon of all of Israel

In one letter to Hayya Gaon that did not contain this Hebrew introduction, the writer, al-Baradānī, the Ḥazzan of the synagogue of Baghdad, made a special point to apologize for composing his letter in Arabic, rather than Hebrew:

I apologize for writing this letter in Arabic, but I was away, and when I returned...my heart was occupied by letters that arrived from my sons that said in them that one of my sisters, the son of another sister, and the son of [my] daughter had died...My lord Gaon, I have not found a single person to go on the Pilgrimage.<sup>72</sup> And I do not have a letter formulary [*rasūm kitāb*]<sup>73</sup>, so I wrote this letter quickly, relying on your favor, that you will excuse me.<sup>74</sup>

Similarly, the geonim referred to their affiliates using such idioms as the Hebrew *ahoveni* (our love) and *yedidenu* (our beloved). All of these terms hearkened back to biblical ideas of covenantal love and emphasized the close relations between the yeshivot and their followers. By composing the majority of their letters in literary Hebrew rather than the everyday spoken language of Arabic and employing Hebrew idioms alluding to biblical notions of covenantal

<sup>71</sup> T-S 16.318r., l.5-6; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 43.

<sup>72</sup> The Haj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca and major trade route.

<sup>73</sup> This manuscript, T-S 1\* was lost, so I was not able to look at the original. I rely mostly on Gil's edition (Doc. #58) based on previously edited sources. The end of some of the lines is cut off, and Gil had assumed that the last word of the line was *rasūl*, referring to a "messenger." Since the word is cut off, however, I am choosing to read this as *rasūm*, meaning forms, official document, or design. If I am correct, this would imply that individuals who composed letters in Hebrew to the geonim at this period did not necessarily compose all of the text on their own, but rather copied the correct "form" in their own correspondence.

<sup>74</sup> T-S 1\*; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 58.

loyalty when addressing their followers, individuals affiliated with the Babylonian yeshivot elevated and distinguished their correspondence from more mundane mercantile and political communication.

In fact, when men submitted *she 'elot* to the yeshiva in Baghdad, they typically sent them to other yeshiva affiliates well in advance of when they would be sent to Baghdad. That way, other yeshiva affiliates with higher ranks in the hierarchy could look them over and make any necessary revisions to ensure that the *she 'elot* were as eloquent and halakhically sound as possible. When the men of Qabes submitted *she 'elot* to Ya'akov b. Nissim without any time to look them over, he admonished them:

This matter is difficult for me. Why did you send him, in this way, since there was no space to read over your questions? If there was a place that needed a repair I would have repaired it ... My brother, do not do as before. Send [letters] to me before the holiday.<sup>75</sup>

The shared knowledge of literary, epistolary Hebrew, the language of Halakha, and the use of titles and idioms of affection created a fraternity of elite Rabbanite Jews across the Mediterranean who were loyal to each other and to the institution of the yeshiva.

But, like their Muslim counterparts, the geonim also corresponded with and entered into patronage relationships with those who did not share their religious vision or recognize their authority, such as Karaite Jews. As discussed earlier, Hayya Gaon relied on the Karaite Tustarīs to transport letters on his behalf. Moreover, around 998, Shmu'el b. Hofnī wrote to a follower in Fustat, hoping to cultivate a group of the city's "prominent men" (*wujūh*), possibly a reference to individuals with government affiliations, who could be "prodded" to benefit him in the same way as his patrons in Baghdad. In doing so, he asked the letter recipient to thank a Karaite named Abū Sulaymān David b. Bapshād "since he has evinced toward me nothing but kindness and

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<sup>75</sup> T-S 16.62r., l.15-21; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 36.

benefited me and been loyal to me ... let him know of the esteem in which I hold his loyalty.”<sup>76</sup>

The gaon characterized this relationship as a bond of loyalty between two individuals only, without any adherence to wider shared ideals or the institution of the yeshiva as a whole.

### Favors for Individuals

These connections with a wide variety of elites throughout the Mediterranean ensured that relations with the yeshivot brought concrete benefits to the yeshiva and to those with whom they corresponded, even without a relationship with a centralized political authority. For example, around 990, Elḥanan b. Shemarya, the son of the head of the community of Babylonians in Fustat, traveled to Moṣul with his partner. He hoped to travel on to Baghdad, but Sahl, the *alluf* of the yeshiva who was also a judge in Moṣul, wrote to Ṣemaḥ Ṣedeq, the gaon of Sura to tell him that Elḥanan and his partner were scared of traveling to Baghdad because they feared that the government would rob them. Ṣemaḥ Ṣedeq immediately did everything that he could to assist Elḥanan b. Shemarya and his compatriot. He wrote that, when he heard that Elḥanan was in Mosul, “Our soul was revived just as if our son of blessed memory...were standing among us, just as ‘the spirit of Jacob revived for he (Joseph) was alive (Gen 45:27) even though he did not believe it at the time.’” He continued, “You are precious to us and known for your greatness in Torah, and for the piety and righteousness of your father, the elder in wisdom and love of the Lord.”<sup>77</sup> Semah Sedeq assured Elḥanan that the Yeshiva of Sura would protect him: “We made an oath to [our deputy] that if you came with the help of God, you would not have a problem.” Although Elḥanan never made it to Baghdad, Ṣemaḥ Ṣedeq explained, “[w]e took it upon ourselves to provide [Elḥanan] with the *shakhor ha-derekh* (the road tax) that he

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<sup>76</sup> Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 48. See also Rustow, “Patronage in the Context of Solidarity.”

<sup>77</sup> Mosseri III 206 (L279); Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 45.

will need [to return to the land of Israel], and we paid all of his expenses ... from one hundred to one thousand pieces of silver.”<sup>78</sup> By instructing his deputies to pay Elḥanan’s expenses, Ṣemaḥ Ṣedeq helped him navigate the complicated, decentralized political apparatus of Buyid Iraq. The gaon was so concerned that his letter would reach Elḥanan in Fustat that he paid a Muslim courier ten dirhams to transport it. This postal fee (*al-ḥaq*) is recorded in Arabic script on the verso of the letter.<sup>79</sup>

Similarly, in 1030 when Sahlān b. Avraham of Fustat faced a threat to his leadership, Hayya offered to write to Abū l-Naṣr Faḍl al-Tustarī, a prominent Fatimid courtier and Karaite Jew to “ask him...to direct his solicitude (*‘ināya*) towards you” and intercede on his behalf, likely before the Fatimid government.<sup>80</sup> In doing so, Hayya cited Sahlān’s “covenantal loyalty (*‘ahd*) [to the yeshiva] and the firmness of my heart.”<sup>81</sup> Here, the leader of the Babylonian-Rabbanite yeshiva residing in Buyid Iraq asks a Karaite Jewish government official in Fatimid Egypt to perform a favor for another Rabbanite—to thank him for his loyalty to the yeshiva in Baghdad. This transaction epitomizes the overlapping forms of personal loyalty characteristic of Buyid-era political relations and the relative insignificance of the political borders between different territories.

Another example of the benefit of such ties was the ability to conduct business more easily in various locations across the Mediterranean. For example, when a man from Baghdad needed to claim his brother’s property in Fustat, Hayya wrote to Elḥanan b. Shemarya, his representative in Fustat on behalf of the two brothers:

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 1.37–40.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 1.6.

<sup>80</sup> Mosseri I a 5 (L2), Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 41; See the discussion in Rustow, “Formal and Informal Patronage,” 360.

<sup>81</sup> Mosseri I a 5 (L2), Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 41.

I was asked to write on behalf of a man in Fustat, and he is Abu al-Faḍl Mar Rav Yosef b. Bishr, may God help him, and his brother, the Sheikh Abu al-Ḥasan Mar Rav ‘Alī b. Bishr, may god make permanent his strength, was entrusted to claim [Abu al-Faḍl’s] rightful property [in Fustat], and the power of attorney [*al-awrāka*] is in my handwriting, and it is true. And this man who is entrusted, who is the lord Abu al-Ḥasan...comes from prestige in Baghdad, of nobility among its elders. I am asking you, my lord, the Rosh Ha-Seder ... not to bother him in summoning him for trial...and help him, the lord Abu al-Ḥasan, in his writing to his brother regarding what he can do to advance his affairs and his rights.<sup>82</sup>

Presumably, the brothers could have reclaimed their property using the court system in Egypt, provided that the legal documents that gave them the rights to the property were admissible. Yet by enlisting a prominent religious leader from their city of origin to vouch on behalf of their character, the brothers likely were able to avoid a lengthy legal battle.

Thus, there were material benefits to affiliation with the yeshivot even in the absence of a direct relationship between the yeshivot and a centralized political power. The geonim and their followers, all of whom were embedded in political and mercantile associations throughout the Mediterranean, leveraged their diffuse networks on each other’s behalf. When they described performing these favors, however, they emphasized that the relationship between the yeshiva and its deputies transcended the individual patron-client relations that saturated the surrounding Islamicate society.

### **Part III: Covenant Yeshiva, Politics of Powerlessness**

Beginning in the ninth century, the geonim bestowed on their affiliates abroad honorary titles that had originally been reserved for the scholars in Babylonia.<sup>83</sup> For the title-holder, a title from the yeshiva gave him prestige and authority within his own community. It also meant that

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<sup>82</sup> T-S 10 J 27.10r, l.5-11. Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 39.

<sup>83</sup> Ben Sasson, “Varieties of inter-communal relations in the Geonic period,” *Jews of Medieval Islam: Community, Society and Identity*, ed. D. Frank (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 17-31.

he, himself, had a stake in ensuring the well-being of the yeshivot in Baghdad and spreading a message extolling their authority and primacy in Jewish tradition.

But from where, exactly, did the authority of Babylonia derive? And what meaning did it have outside of Abbasid territory? The answers to these questions were not at all clear during the second half of the tenth century, when the political models that had once given power to the yeshivot had become obsolete. Babylonian Jews, like their Muslim counterparts, missionized throughout Fatimid territory, experimenting with different models explaining the relationship between their own religious authority and political power. They justified their own authority outside of the areas in which they had access to actual political power. This section will consider the process by which the yeshivot came to articulate an argument for their continued authority in Jewish tradition, ultimately deriving their authority, as rabbis, from a conscious rejection of the corruption of gentile politics.

### A Covenantal Community

During the Buyid era, the geonim described the bond between themselves and their followers as a covenant (*brit*) which hearkened back to the original covenant that God made with Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 17:7).<sup>84</sup> In the Hebrew Bible, the terms *ahavah* and *yedidut* describe covenantal love, the relationship between God and the Jewish people.<sup>85</sup> Every gaon during the Buyid era made use of this language in addressing his followers. As Neḥemya Gaon wrote to his compatriots in Fustat in 962:

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<sup>84</sup> In his letter from 928, Sa'adya never describes the relationship between the yeshivot and the community as being rooted in a covenant, nor does he make reference to ancestral ties between the two communities. The language of covenant, while based on traditional notions of Jewish community, became more pronounced during the Buyid era.

<sup>85</sup> Seth Schwartz, *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society? Reciprocity and Solidarity in Ancient Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 168.

And (it is) out of all of our love for you [and] the closeness of the covenant which is between us and among you that we write to you every year and look forward and hope that you remember [our] love (*ahava*) and covenant and friendship (*yedidut*), and that you remember us and the sages of the yeshiva, and to send [the various types of donations] just as your ancestors—may their memory be a blessing—did a long time ago and also as you did in the days of the (previous gaon).<sup>86</sup>

It is easy to read this as boilerplate geonic language. After all, the yeshivot had been in operation for hundreds of years, and they traced their genealogy back to the sages of the Talmud.

Nevertheless, the claims to antiquity became increasingly important during the Buyid period when the power of the state could no longer justify the supremacy of the yeshivot. Without the centralized institutions of the Abbasid state to rely on, the geonim instead invoked their historic covenantal relationship to the communities under their jurisdiction—a relationship that pre-dated and would outlive the now-obsolete Abbasid State.

This covenant was instantiated every year when the communities and officials under the gaon's authority swore an oath of loyalty to him, as attested to in a Judeo-Arabic responsum from the Cairo Geniza:

The well-known usage of the people which is manifest and recognized concerning the renewal of the authorization of judges every year and the subordination of the *reshuyot* of the two yeshivot to their heads.<sup>87</sup>

Yet even if the community or individual did not swear an oath of loyalty to the gaon in a given year, the covenantal relationship remained in effect. As the gaon went on to explain:

The authority [of the geonim] is in accordance with the traditional norms. No individual of the people, nor any community may change the tradition accepted by the forefathers for official custom is in accordance with it ... all of this would be obligatory to these people regarding the Rosh Yeshiva who has authority over their district, even if they had not sworn to him in accordance with what has been discussed in this responsum. As for the previously mentioned oath of theirs, it has the status of an oath to fulfil a commandment and is obligatory to them.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> London. Bodleian Library, MS Heb 12.25r, l.8-10; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 15.

<sup>87</sup> T-SAr.48.87; Sklare, *Shemu'el b. Hofni*, Original text: 97. Translation: 82.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

In essence, the covenant between the geonim and those subject to their *reshut* was based on “traditional norms” and the practices of the community’s forefathers. An individual or community’s disloyalty did not negate the oath of loyalty to the yeshiva that their ancestors had made even centuries earlier. Rather, the covenant remained in effect for all eternity, even—and especially—during times of political upheaval.

### The Jewish Body-Politic

During the Buyid period, letters from the yeshivot emphasized the symbiotic relationship between the yeshivot and their followers. The authority of the Babylonian yeshivot derived, not from external political power, but from their eternal position as the “heads” of the worldwide Jewish body-politic. If the yeshivot in Babylonia suffered, Jewish communities as far away as Egypt and Qayrawan would also suffer. This Jewish body-politic existed independent from external forms of political power.

Rabbinic sources had emphasized the significance of the Sanhedrin, the mythical precursors of the yeshivot, for the wellbeing of Israel. They likened the Sanhedrin to a vineyard, and they compared scholars to grape clusters.<sup>89</sup> Geonim made ample use of this Hebrew and Aramaic imagery in their letters. In letters from both 968 and 970, Sherira quoted the Babylonian Talmud:

This people (Israel) is like a vine: its branches are the aristocracy, its clusters the scholars, its leaves the common people, its twigs those in Israel that are devoid of learning. This is what was meant... ‘Let the clusters pray for the leaves, for were it not for the leaves the clusters could not exist’ (Hullin 92a).<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Gary Porton, “The Grape Cluster in Jewish literature and Art of Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 27, no. 2 (1976): 159-176.

<sup>90</sup> DK 184Av, l.22-25, T-S 13 J 25.5r, l.35-36; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc.19, 25.



The metaphor of the grape vine emphasized the interdependence between the yeshivot and their followers. The yeshivot not only depended on the “leaves”, or their donors within the Jewish community as a whole, but also prayed on their behalf.

Sherira also likened the Jewish people as a whole to a body; the yeshiva was the head, without which the rest of the body could not survive:

How can you believe that you will remain intact and that your houses of study will not suffer while the yeshiva goes to pieces? We are your heads, as it is written: ‘Your heads—your tribes’ (Deut. 29:9; *i.e.*, there are no tribes where there are no heads). How can a body remain intact when the head is sick? The body goes after the head... ‘My house lies in ruins while you busy yourselves each with his own house’ (Haggai 1:4).<sup>91</sup>

In this way, Sherira argues, even if a community has learned scholars who patronize their own school of Jewish learning, this is not enough. This local school will suffer if the yeshivot suffer, since they are bound together and dependent on each other, regardless of the political boundaries between them. In essence, the worldwide Jewish body-politic transcended the fleeting nature of contemporaneous political events.

“Seeking modestly, humility, and meekness.” The Letter of Sherira Gaon

By the end of the tenth century, the geonim came to define themselves, as rabbis, in direct opposition to state power. They did not simply argue that gentile politics was irrelevant to the relationship between the yeshivot and the communities who wrote to them. They derived their authority from their unequivocal rejection of the corruption of gentile politics.

In 987, leaders of the Jewish community of Qayrawan wrote to Sherira Gaon, at the Yeshiva of Pumbedita, to ask for an explanation of the chain of transmission/authority of Jewish tradition and the names of all of the rabbinic authorities from after the time of the completion of

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<sup>91</sup> T-S 10 J 1v, 1.3-7; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 23.

the Talmud up to the present day. The question itself exemplifies contemporaneous theological issues in the Islamicate world more broadly regarding the nature of oral transmission of sacred texts. The yeshiva's deputies wanted a responsum that could counter the challenges of both Karaite Jews and Muslims, who questioned the authenticity of the Oral Torah and the authority of contemporaneous rabbis (and, by extension, the rabbis of Qayrawan) to teach it.<sup>92</sup>

Sherira's answer took the form of a *shalsheret*, or chain of transmission, hearkening back to Mishnah Avot. Overall, the text provided a spiritual genealogy depicting an uninterrupted chain of transmission from Yehudah ha-Nasi all the way down to Sherira and his son Hayya that legitimated their own authority as the inheritors of the entirety of the Oral Torah.

Most of this account was consistent with previous geonic sources, and it provides a halakhic justification for rabbinic authority. It also served to counter the arguments of the Karaites, who asserted that the Oral Torah was made up. Yet throughout the text, Sherira condemns Jewish merchants and other Jewish officials who had close relations with the state, in direct contrast to previous texts. For example, Sherira describes Aharon b. Yosef ha-Kohen Khalāf b. Sargado, the Gaon of Pumbedita from 942-960, as a merchant who was not learned and should never have been appointed gaon in the first place:

Aharon b. Yosef ha-Kohen was appointed to the gaonate. He was not from the descendants of the rabbis. Rather he was from merchants, and Mar Rav Mevasher Gaon had appointed him to sit in the Great Row in the Yeshiva. And this was not because he was fit to succeed our father the Gaon in the geonate. Rather the post should have gone to Mar R' Amram the Av, the brother of our mother.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Talya Fishman, "Claims About Mishna in the Epistle of Sherira Gaon: Islamic Theology and Jewish History," in *Border Crossings: Interreligious Interaction and the Exchange of Ideas in the Islamic Middle Ages*, ed. David Freidenreich & Miriam Goldstein, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012): 65-77.

<sup>93</sup> Lewin, *Iggeret Sherira Gaon*, 120.

Natan ha-Bavli, by contrast, had praised Aharon's erudition and emphasized his father-in-law's role in brokering a peace agreement between David b. Zakkay and Sa'adya Gaon. The Geniza has preserved fragments of Aharon's Judeo-Arabic commentary on the Pentateuch as well as some of his responsa. His responsa were known by and cited by later scholars, including Maimonides, Abraham b. Ezra, and even Sherira himself.<sup>94</sup> So why, in his letter, did Sherira describe Ibn Sarjādo's identity as a "merchant" as a disqualification from being a scholar or gaon?

The political context in which Sherira lived can provide some clarification. As a "merchant," Aharon was part of a class of individuals who had once provided the yeshivot with a conduit to political power. After the fragmentation of the caliphate, however, this position involved taking part in the often messy, unstable world of Buyid politics, a world of reciprocity. For Sherira, connection with this world was inherently corrupting, and the qualities of a successful merchant were antithetical to the ideal qualities of the Gaon, the halakhic arbiter of the entire Jewish people. Moreover, in this narrative, the noble, ancient, and interrupted ancestry of the rabbis is contrasted with the "merchants" who have no ancestry worth mentioning.

Sherira, instead, emphasized that not only was he from an uninterrupted lineage of rabbis, but also that he and his son were of exilarchic descent. In a society that valued lineage and ancestry, this noble ancestry would further legitimate Sherira's authority. At the same time, Sherira claimed that his exilarchic ancestors had abandoned the "evil ways" of the exilarchs:

The exilarchs exercised heavy handed authority and wielded great power in the days of the Persians and in the days of the Ishmaelites. For they would buy the exilarchate for large sums of money, and some of them would greatly torment the rabbis and trouble them. Our ancestors were of exilarchic descent. However, they

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<sup>94</sup> Arnold Franklin, "Ibn Sarjado Aaron (Khalāf) ben Joseph Ha-Kohen," *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, ed. Normal A. Stillman (Leiden: Brill Online, 2015).

abandoned all those evil ways of the exilarchate and joined the rabbis of the (yeshiva) seeking humility and debasement.<sup>95</sup>

In Sherira's account, the exilarchs' evil ways derived from the corruption inherent in their close relations with the state. They paid government officials to appoint them to their posts, and they used the force of the state to oppress the rabbis. Sherira's ancestors, by contrast, repudiated this corrupt relationship with gentile power in favor of "humility and debasement," and these values were the foundation of the geonic yeshivot.

Needless to say, this is patently false. The geonim were eager to wield the power of the state whenever it could serve their interests. Only a few decades earlier, Natan Ha-Bavli had used the relationship to state power to legitimate the authority of the geonim.

So why did Sherira describe relations with the state as so inherently corrupting and incompatible with rabbinic scholarship? The answer almost certainly has to do with the political context in which Sherira lived. In the decentralized Buyid polity, Sherira had no "state" to extol. Unlike his predecessor Sa'adya, Sherira could not invite Jews in Fustat or Qayrawan to write to him to intercede on their behalf before the caliph. Instead of interpreting this as a defeat, Sherira turned the esteem for government power on its head. Sherira's own powerlessness was itself a sign of virtue and of his position as the heir to the eternal authority of the rabbis.

This rhetoric of powerlessness was remarkably useful for the yeshiva's title-holders outside of Buyid territory. Precisely because it so rejected contemporaneous politics, Sherira's letter constituted a useful path for advancing the authority of rabbinic leaders in many different historical and political contexts. It became the foundation text for halakhic history, used by Rashi (France) and Avraham Ibn Dawud (Christian Spain). By the end of the twelfth century, the vast majority of Jews throughout the Mediterranean and Western Europe considered themselves to be

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<sup>95</sup> Lewin, *Iggeret Sherira Gaon*, 92-93. A version of this translation: Herman, *A Prince without a Kingdom*, 340.

heirs to the Babylonian tradition as expressed in Sherira's letter, and they understood this tradition to have defined itself explicitly in opposition to gentile political power throughout its history.

### “The Power and Majesty of the Kingdom”

This tradition developed in the very specific decentralized world of Buyid Iraq. When political circumstances changed, such that a relationship with centralized political authority did in fact yield the same benefits as before, rabbinic leaders, like their predecessors during the united Abbasid Caliphate, glorified the gentile authorities of their own polity to those with whom they corresponded.

Consider this letter from 1030 written by Eliyahu b. Avraham, Beit Din of the Yeshiva of Baghdad based in Raqqa, to Ya'akov b. Yosef, Haver of the Yeshiva, in Haleb (Aleppo), in part, regarding the transmission of letters from the yeshivot of Baghdad to various communities in Syria. In 1022, the Mirdasid Dynasty, centered in Haleb, had taken control of Raqqa, thus uniting the two territories in the same political realm. He began the letter as follows:

Receive greetings...from us, the Beit Din, and from our dear Son Mar Rav' Amram and from our fellows, the elders of the three communities [Babylonian Rabbanites, Palestinian Rabbanites, and Karaites] that reside with us at the gate of our Beit Din to bring forth stolen objects and damages from the hands of oppressors from many years ago with the help of the 'holy one, may his name be blessed' and with the splendor of the Torah that has been bequeathed to us and the splendor of the kingdom that deals kindly with us and continues to bestow a string of kindness on us, before them.<sup>96</sup>

This introduction is noteworthy because contemporaneous letters related to the Babylonian yeshivot do not make explicit references to gentile political power and, as we have seen, Sherira had characterized relations with gentile political power as inherently corrupting. The vast

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<sup>96</sup> JTS MS Schechter 4r, l.8-12.

majority of Eliyahu's letter, written in literary Hebrew, extends greetings on behalf of his own yeshiva and the yeshivot in Baghdad to the men of Ḥalab. On the back of the letter, however, Eliyahu explains in detail the events to which he alludes in the introduction regarding the kingdom's "kindness" to him:

We in this place need to balance between two factions of Rabbanites and the Karaites because they are also found in our *Reshut*. ... Last week, we took an apartment from thieves among the Karaites who had stolen [from us], thirteen years ago today. We returned it to an orphan girl. One of the thieves began to chatter, exaggerating about us. His words were heard by the Lord of our land, from our fellow man and from some of their judges. He sent after me a police officer. So I went to him, since every Monday and Thursday we enter to greet the judge and the criminals among the gentiles and the nobles of the polity. And if there is a need or request for a witness among our people, no one from among the guards outside prevents us [from entering]. When I went to him, to the presence of the house of the king ... he said to me: 'What is this that we heard, that one of the [Karaites] cursed [you], and why did you not tell us at once to send oppressors after him to exile him to uncultivated land, and announce in the markets and the streets that anyone who conceals this individual renounces all of his possessions will be killed and his house and shop will be sealed.' And when his neighbors saw that all of this harm came from the government, they came and placated with us [the yeshiva authorities] not to kill him. When I saw this, I crawled in fear. ... They beat him with whips in public, according to their custom. So I returned to placate the lord of the land to repair the damage, but he told me to calm myself since by my doing this it gained the force of law. All of the Jews heard and were in fear and they will not continue to sin knowingly against you. And [now] many of the sons of our people are strict in bringing forth stolen objects under their hand because of the power of the majesty of the kingdom.<sup>97</sup>

In essence, the Muslim authorities heard that an individual had cursed Eliyahu in public, and in retaliation, they flogged him, seized his property, and threatened to kill him and those who protected him. Realizing that the gentile authorities would enforce Eliyahu's rulings, a number of Jews who had stolen from the Beit Din in previous years—likely when the government was fragmented and did not have the power or desire to enforce the rulings of Jewish leaders—came

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<sup>97</sup> JTS MS Schechter 4v, 1.2-19; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 73.

forward and returned the money because they feared physical punishment at the hands of the gentile authorities.

Although Eliyahu “crawled in fear” when he saw the government forces flog the thief and seize his property, he ultimately recognized that the people’s fear of government sanctions would only work to his advantage. In concluding the letter, he characterized the government’s actions as fulfilling God’s will, ultimately leading to a “peaceful resolution”:

The holy one blessed be he lights up our eyes with his Torah and ensures our successes since this nation of prophets cannot be vanquished. And were it not for the glory of the kingdom we would never have found the stolen money. I told you this story, my dears, so that you will know of our troubles with them and the peaceful resolution.<sup>98</sup>

Even as the Babylonian geonim of the Buyid period denounced involvement with gentile political power as inherently corrupting, oppressive, and antithetical to rabbinic values, their followers sought the stability and power that such a relationship could provide.

## Conclusion

The political fragmentation of the Buyid period led to a proliferation of provincial courts throughout Iraq and the Mediterranean, many of which employed Jewish officials. Despite the instability inherent in their positions, Jewish *jahbadhs* were integrated into elite Buyid social networks, and they were able to network with a wide variety of high-placed individuals throughout the Mediterranean.

The yeshivot, though deprived of a relationship with a centralized political power, were able to take advantage of long-distance mercantile networks to communicate with their followers in communities far from Baghdad. The geonim and their followers developed a unique scribal

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 1.19-22.

and epistolary tradition based on a fusion of Abbasid/Buyid chancery practices and traditional Jewish rhetoric; in doing so, they cultivated an elite network of individuals loyal to the institution of the yeshiva. At the same time, the geonim networked with individuals of different backgrounds; they used these connections to perform favors for those with whom they corresponded. The connection with the yeshiva continued to yield concrete benefits for their followers.

Ultimately, however, the geonim asserted that connections with gentile political power were irrelevant to the yeshiva's claims to authority over Jews worldwide. This tradition, which reached its apotheosis in the Letter of Sherira Gaon, constituted a direct response to the political challenges of Buyid Iraq. It would also define rabbinic culture's "understanding of its own literary formation" for centuries to come.<sup>99</sup>

The yeshivot were revived during the Buyid era because of the persistence of ties between Baghdad and the Mediterranean, as well as the relative openness of Buyid political culture to non-Muslim participation in elite social networks. Yet by the second third of the eleventh century, those conditions had begun to change. The Buyid confederation, never entirely united, gradually lost territory to Turkish Seljuq invaders, and long-distance trading networks between Iraq and the Mediterranean declined. Within Iraq, Sunni Muslims objected more and more to what they considered a non-legitimate dynasty, and they increasingly tried to limit the role of non-Muslims in government. The next chapter will look at the effects of the newly-ascendant Seljuq-Sunni state on Jewish courtiers and institutions in Baghdad throughout the second half of the eleventh century.

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<sup>99</sup> Fishman, "Claims about the Mishnah," 67.



### Chapter 3: “Suppose the Jew is dead”: Jews and the “Sunni Revival” in Seljuq Baghdad, 1037-1146

In 1037, the nobles, *qādīs*, witnesses, and religious scholars of the caliph al-Qā`im gathered in the guard house of the Abbasid palace. There, they summoned the *jathlīq* of the Christians (the Nestorian patriarch) and the *ra`is al-jālūt* (the Jewish exilarch) of the Jews to appear before them. Once the representatives of the Jews and Christians arrived, the officials issued a caliphal decree, ordering the Jews and the Christians to wear distinguishing clothing (*ghiyār*) as befitting their status as *dhimmī* “requiring them to be noticeable and humbled and submissive and to be distinguished from the Muslims to enhance the grandeur of Islam and its people.” The Muslim chronicler and judge Ibn al-Jawzī copied the text of the decree in his *Kitāb al-Muntaẓam*. The text that Ibn al-Jawzī recorded did not specify exactly what constituted the *ghiyār*, though it probably hearkened back to Harun Al-Rashid’s *Kitāb al-Kharāj*, requiring the wearing of a *zunnār* (round thick cord) around the waist and some sort of distinguishing headgear for men.<sup>1</sup> According to Ibn al-Jawzī, neither the exilarch nor the patriarch raised any objection: “They said they heard and will obey.”<sup>2</sup>

During the previous hundred years of Buyid rule, the caliphs had been virtually powerless, unable to issue any binding rulings, let alone restrictions on *dhimmīs*. But beginning in 1037, and especially after the Seljuq conquest of Baghdad, caliphs and sultans continually issued decrees imposing the *ghiyār* on *dhimmīs*, and the population expressed a great deal of

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<sup>1</sup> Yedida Stillman, *Arab Dress: A Short History from the Dawn of Islam to Modern Times* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 103.

<sup>2</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, VIII (Hyderabad, YEAR), 96-97.

animosity towards Jews who held positions in the governmental bureaucracy. Why did the issue of *dhimmīs* become so central and problematic for the state during the Seljuq period? How did this impact Jewish government officials and, by extension, the communities they represented?

This chapter examines the effect of Seljuq rule and a new Sunni ascendancy on the Jews of Iraq. Part I explores the social and political dynamics of Baghdad during this period, examining the debates and contradictions surrounding the place of non-Muslims in a majority-Sunni society and government. Part II explores how Jewish communal leaders in Baghdad tried to navigate this new political context and advance their own interests and those of their co-religionists before the state. Part III uses the fragmentary surviving Jewish sources to suggest how these changes created a crisis of ideals in the Jewish community, forcing them to reevaluate their own relationship with the state once more.

#### Part I: The Rise of the Seljuqs

After 945, the Abbasid caliph had been rendered nearly powerless. By the end of the tenth century, however, as the Buyids lost control of their armies, the situation started to reverse. The caliph al-Qādir (r. 991-1031) appointed his own judges, intervened in intra-urban disputes on behalf of Sunni jurists, and issued edicts attacking Mu'tazilites and Shiites; he required any Mu'tazilite to formally repent before being appointed to a religious office. On his deathbed in 1030, he successfully appointed his son, al-Qā'im, as his successor. Al-Qā'im continued his father's policies and further expanded his influence within the city. One of the most significant ways in which he asserted his prerogative as "commander of the faithful" was in issuing the edict requiring *dhimmīs* to wear the *ghiyār* in 1037.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Hanne, *Putting the Caliph in his Place: Power, Authority, and the Late Abbasid Caliphate* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 2007), Ch. 2.

That same year, the Turkish Seljuqs conquered Nishapur. Typically, the Seljuqs, a nomadic dynasty, pillaged the cities they conquered. But Al-Qā ‘im sent messengers to them forbidding them from doing so, and the Seljuqs, who were Sunnis, responded favorably to his requests. When the Buyid’s chief official, Al-Basasiri, seemed to be acquiring too much power, the caliph invited the Seljuqs to enter Baghdad in 1055. By 1059, with the help of the Turkish Seljuqs and their charismatic leader Tughril Bek, the caliph expelled the Shiite Buyids from Baghdad, reestablishing Sunni hegemony in the city for the next two hundred years.

Theoretically, the Abbasid caliphs hoped to restore the religious mores of the first century of Islam. Yet they found themselves ruling over a vastly different polity than the one in which the caliphate had been established. For one thing, Baghdad’s population had become majority-Muslim.<sup>4</sup> In addition, unlike the situation in the eighth century, the caliphs did not have direct control of their army and were thus dependent on the Seljuq sultans for the force necessary to govern. And rather than serving as the saviors of the caliphs as later sources would remember them, the Seljuqs tried to minimize their influence as much as possible. During the next hundred years, the Seljuq sultans and the Abbasid caliphs, though allegedly bound to each other through a covenant of loyalty ( *‘ahd*), competed with each other for control over Baghdad’s key institutions and for the allegiances of its populations.

The public sphere was transformed during this period. Caliphs, sultans, and private individuals endowed a great number of large-scale building projects, including the construction of madrasas, mosques, and palaces. Caliphs and sultans alike tried to promote Sunni-Islamic behavior, and, as Christian Lange argues, they transformed the position of the *muhtasib*, a market inspector who had the right to enter private homes and regulate what took place within them

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Bulliet estimates that conversion was at roughly 90% during this period. Richard Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 83.

under the Buyids, into a more religious-inquisitorial role. The *muhtasib* of Baghdad was ordered to prevent women from wandering outside at night for amusement, and he flogged owners of bathhouses who did not ensure that men wore a loincloth inside of their establishments.<sup>5</sup> Brothels were banned.<sup>6</sup> The *muhtasib* also outlawed public Shiite celebrations and enforced restrictions on non-Muslims.

It is perhaps most useful to understand these developments in the context of the rise and consolidation of Sunni religious scholars, the '*ulamā*', as a powerful social group within the city of Baghdad. During the Buyid period, most of the '*ulamā*' in Baghdad were foreigners who traveled from place to place in search of knowledge. Yet as Daphna Ephrat found, after the Seljuq conquest, the '*ulamā*' increasingly settled permanently within Baghdad, a consequence of both the precariousness of travel and the increasingly opportunities for patronage within the city, especially in *madrasas*.<sup>7</sup> The '*ulamā*' were drawn from the ranks of various segments of the urban population, and they thus had a great deal of influence at all levels of society. As they became more influential, caliphs, sultans, and private individuals all endowed *madrasas* to give stipends to them, hoping to curry their favor and loyalty.<sup>8</sup> Gradually, individuals associated with the '*ulamā*' came to hold positions in the government bureaucracy, and religious scholars sought to influence the practices of governance.

The powerful Seljuq vizier Nizām al-Mulk articulated an ideology that facilitated the convergence of the '*ulamā*' and the state. Previously, the '*ulamā*' had spurned government

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<sup>5</sup> Christian Lange, "Changes in the Office of the *Hisba* under the Seljuqs," in *The Seljuqs: Politics, Society and Culture*, ed. C. Lange & S. Mecit, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 165.

<sup>6</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, VIII, 225: "The brothels were banned and closed and their removal was demanded. "The reason for this was an abundance of depravity and drinking of wine, and a Jewish man drank while singing from the Quran."

<sup>7</sup> On this process, see Daphna Ephrat, *A Learned Society in a Period of Transition* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Vanessa Van Renterghem, "Controlling and Developing Baghdad: Caliphs, Sultans, and the Balance of Power in the Abbasid Capital," in *The Seljuqs: Politics, Society and Culture* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2011): 117-38.

service as corrupting. Yet as Nizām al-Mulk declared in his *Siyasatnama*, the sultan’s role was to enforce justice in order to create prosperity. The standard of justice “was set by Islamic law and its representatives”—that is, the ‘*ulamā*’. As Linda Darling explains, “On the basis of this integration of political ideals, religious scholars, who had previously scorned government service, now began writing advice literature for rulers and assuming an active role in government.”<sup>9</sup>

As the ‘*ulamā*’ consolidated as a group and increasingly sought government posts and patronage, they resented the practice of employing non-Muslims in administration. They found themselves competing against non-Muslims for a finite number of government posts, and they tried to monopolize such positions for themselves. After all, the employment of non-Muslims in high-level positions challenged the “visible Sunni superiority on which [the *ulamā*] depended for their collective and individual status.”<sup>10</sup>

To both of these ends, the ‘*ulamā*’ instead emphasized and disseminated an ideology of just government that linked the prosperity of the state to the appointment of officials with orthodox, “praiseworthy,” Sunni Muslim beliefs. They argued that, even if a Jew, Christian, Zoroastrian, or Shiite seemed to be a just administrator, he still represented a threat to the community of Muslim believers. As Nizām al-Mulk wrote in his “Book of Kings:”

A tax man may be well-versed in his duties, he may be a secretary, and accountant, or a business expert such that he has no peer in all the world; but if he is a member of a bad sect or bad religion, such as Jew, Christian, or Zoroastrian, he will despise the Muslims and afflict them with hardship on the pretext of taxes and accounts. If the Muslims are oppressed by that heretic or infidel and complain about him he must be dismissed and punished. One must not be concerned with what his intercessors may say—they may say there is no secretary or accountant or tax

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<sup>9</sup> Linda Darling, *A History of Social Justice and Political Power in the Middle East* (London: Routledge, 2012), 92-3.

<sup>10</sup> Luke Yarbrough, “The Madrasa and the Non-Muslims of Thirteenth-Century Egypt: A Reassessment,” in *Entangled Histories: Knowledge, Authority and Jewish Culture in the Thirteenth Century*, ed. Elisheva Baumgarten et al., (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 109.

collector in the world like him; they may say that if he is removed from office, the work will all come to grief, and there is nobody to take his place. This is all lies and such words must not be heeded.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, Nizām al-Mulk argued that even if a given *dhimmī* official was most qualified for his position, he should be dismissed. He illustrated this principle through a story about Umar. The people of a given territory requested that a Jewish tax collector be replaced by a Muslim. But,

On inspection none of the Arabs was found to possess the knowledge to fulfil the post, and of the Persian collectors who were Muslim not one was discovered who had the same ability as the Jew, nor did anybody understand as well as he the various aspects of the work, such as collecting revenue, developing the country, dealing with people, and keeping up with taxes and arrears. ... Of necessity [the vizier] kept the Jew in the appointment.<sup>12</sup>

When the caliph heard this, he was angry and “took up his pen and wrote at the top of the letter in Arabic, *Mata l-Yahudi*,” or “Kill the Jew.” As Nizām al-Mulk explained,

What he meant was, ‘Every man has to die, and death causes dismissal. Know that if a tax collector dies or is dismissed, his work cannot be allowed to lapse. In the end, someone else has to be appointed; why are you so weak and helpless? Suppose the Jew is dead.’<sup>13</sup>

The vizier received the caliph’s order and dismissed the Jew and gave the post to a Muslim with great success: “[T]he Muslim discharged his duties even more efficiently than the Jew; and public works increased.”<sup>14</sup> The moral was clear: even if a non-Muslim seemed to be a competent, just administrator, it was still preferable to give his position to a Muslim.

How did these new developments impact Jewish government officials and, by extension, Baghdad’s rabbinic Jewish leadership? On the one hand, the efforts to create a stable financial system protected financial officials, many of whom were Jews, and there may even have been a

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<sup>11</sup> Nizām al-Mulk, *The Book of Government of Rules for Kings*, trans. Hubert Darke (Taylor and Francis, 2012), 170.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 170-2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

net decrease in violence against *dhimmi*s during the Seljuq period.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, as the Seljuqs and the Abbasids both tried to monopolize the loyalty of the ‘*ulamā*’, they competed to impose humiliating restrictions on *dhimmi* government officials. Likely, in part due to the special treatment that Jewish *jahbadhs* received, many of these edicts had a distinctly anti-Jewish character.

### Reforming the Caliphate’s Financial System

After 936, the centralized Abbasid treasuries had been rendered obsolete. During the Buyid period, *jahbadhs*, many of whom were Jews, acted as private bankers for individual Buyid amirs. The system was rather unstable, however; whenever a strongman needed money, he raided a *jahbadh*, rather than taking out a loan. The early Seljuqs continued this practice. For example, in 1057, right after Tughril Beg returned to Baghdad, the tax-farmer he assigned to Basra, Hazarasb ibn Bankir b. Iyad, “extorted 120,000 dinars from Taj al-Din ibn Sakhta the ‘Alid and Ibn Samḥā the Jew” in order to finance military action against the sultan’s cousin.<sup>16</sup>

By the second half of the eleventh century, the Abbasid caliphs and the Seljuqs understood this system to have been responsible for the failures of the Buyid state. Thus, their first priority after conquering Baghdad was reestablishing control over the administration and ensuring that it functioned properly. This meant collecting taxes regularly, establishing a stable currency and coinage, and most notably, ensuring that the capital treasury was always full so that funds were available in case of emergencies. As Nizām-al-Mulk explained,

Kings have always had two treasuries, the capital treasury and the expenses treasury. As revenue was acquired, it was usually taken to the capital treasury, and seldom

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<sup>15</sup> Deborah Tor, Rayy and the Religious History of the Seljuq Period,” *Der Islam* 93:2 (2016), 395-397.

<sup>16</sup> C.J. Thornberg, *Ibn el-Athiri Chronicon quod Perfectissimum Inscibitur* (Beirut: Dar al-Ṣadir, 1965-1967), Vol. IX, 634. Translation: D.S. Richards, *The Annals of the Saljuq Turks: Selections from Al-Kāmil fī l-Tarīkh of ‘Izz al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 115.

to the expenses treasury, and unless there was urgent necessity they did not allow disbursement from the capital treasury. When they did take anything out, they took it by way of a loan, and put an equivalent sum back later.<sup>17</sup>

As a result, the Seljuq financial system depended on access to loans of significant sums of money. Yet it was crucial that the state paid back these loans or it could find itself in jeopardy. As Nizām al-Mulk explained, “[i]f care is not taken in this way, the whole income of the state will be dissipated on expenses, and if there comes some unexpected need for money, it will give rise to anxiety and there will be shortcoming and delay in meeting the commitment.”<sup>18</sup>

To avoid these issues, the Seljuqs reestablished centralized administrative offices, and they filled the positions in these offices with Jewish and Christian officials who had the requisite knowledge and connections to long distance commercial and credit networks to carry out their duties effectively. In particular, Abu ‘Alī ibn Faḍlān, a Jew from a family of Jewish *jahbadhs*, acted as the head of the *diwān* and as secretary to the Seljuq sultan’s wife (a position he likely achieved due to the connection between the caliph and the sultan). Similarly, he installed Ibn al-Musilaya, from a prominent Nestorian Christian secretarial family, as head of the chancery (*diwan al-’inshā’*). The chronicles implied that the two men filled their offices with members of their respective religions, and they described Ibn Faḍlān as the leader of Jews within the administration and Ibn al-Musilaya as the leader of the Christians.

The wholesale dismissal of these officials would result in the collapse of an already fragile financial system and administration. This was a lesson that the Abbasids’ chief administrator Ibn al-Muslima learned the hard way in 1058. Previously, Ibn al-Muslima had removed the Buyids and their chief administrator, Basasiri, from Baghdad and seized Basasiri’s

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<sup>17</sup> Nizām al-Mulk, *Book of Government*, 239.

<sup>18</sup> Nizām al-Mulk, *Book of Government*, 239.



property. The defeat of the Shiite Buyids was a harbinger of the restoration of just Sunni authority. In Ramadan of that year, according to Ibn al-Jawzī,

The common religious people, characterized by the compatriots of ‘Abd al-Ṣamād,<sup>19</sup> strengthened their demands for requiring the *ahl-dhimma* to wear the *ghiyār*. A Hashemite man known as Ibn Sakrah appeared in the *dīwān*. So [in response] the *Ra’īs al-Ru’asā’* Ibn al-Muslima made a speech addressing this. He spoke about how the *ahl al-dhimma* should not be elevated...and his words were vicious/coarse and he angered him. So [Ibn Sakrah] wrote to the caliph about this.<sup>20</sup>

This incident took place around the time that the Buyid’s former head official, Basasiri, entered Baghdad in the name of the Fatimid caliph, had the *khuṭba* recited in al-Mustanṣir’s name, and arrested the caliph. It would seem that sectarian tensions were particularly high, and by calling for the dismissal of Jewish and Christian officials, Ibn al-Muslima probably hoped to gain the support of sections of Baghdad’s Sunni population, particularly the ‘*ulamā*’. Yet according to Ibn al-Jawzī, by banning Jews and Christians from administrative offices, the administration came to a halt:

There was no power to the order of Ibn Sakrah but Abi ‘Alī b. Faḍlān the Jew the secretary of the Khātūn, Ibn al-Muslima [caliph’s vizier] ordered him to remain in his house and to announce to the Jews and the people who make their livelihood to do like this. Likewise, Ibn al-Muwaṣṣalayā the Christian secretary of the *dīwān* was ordered to do like this. So business came to a halt and slowed the *kuttāb* and the *jahābadha* of the diwan. As a result, he hid the matter from the caliph, and it became worse.<sup>21</sup>

Although eventually Ibn al-Muslima was forbidden from banning Jews and Christians from the *diwan* and “the *ahl a-dhimma* began to sneak away and go to their work,” it was too late. The slowing down of administrative activity created an opening that allowed the Buyids’ chief administrator, Basasiri, to re-enter Baghdad under the banner of the Fatimids a few months later.

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<sup>19</sup> Ṭārīq ‘Abd al-Samad was a street in the east side of Baghdad, so this might refer to the followers of ‘Abd al-Samad or the residents of this particular neighborhood.

<sup>20</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, VIII, 190.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

He arrested the caliph and took revenge on Ibn al-Muslima for seizing his property. He had Ibn al-Muslima paraded throughout the city (*tashrīr*) on a donkey and tortured to death.<sup>22</sup>

The Seljuqs reentered Baghdad soon after. After they deposed Basasiri and the Fatimids and freed the caliph from prison, their first priority was establishing an effective administration under their own control. To this end, they tried to prevent interruptions in administration, regardless of who, exactly, was employed. They condemned the practice of raiding wealthy individuals whenever one needed money, and they tried to protect individuals who collected or loaned money to the state—many of whom were Jewish *jahbadhs*—from violence.

The most significant example of this policy in action was related by the Sunnī jurist Ibn al-Bannāʾ (c. 1068) in his autograph diary.<sup>23</sup> According to Ibn al-Bannāʾ some individuals “assaulted” the Jewish *jahbadh* Ibn Faḍlān in 1068, and “a Bedouin drew a knife against him and wanted to kill him,” apparently because he owed Ibn Faḍlān a debt and did not want to (or was unable to) pay him back.<sup>24</sup> A few days later, Ibn Bannāʾ reported that the Sheikh Abu ʿAbd-allāh b. Jarada “adhered” to Ibn Faḍlān in the *dīwān* that Thursday “until the end of the day.” In response, “the caliph issued permission that a guard be assigned to protect Ibn Fadlan, which was done.”<sup>25</sup> Later, the caliph explained, “I am afraid to let go of Ibn Faḍlān for the common people will kill him in my precincts.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntazam*, VIII, 196-197. On the symbolism of this form of punishment, see Christian Lange, *Justice, Punishment, and the Medieval Muslim Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Chpt. 2.

<sup>23</sup> Ibn al-Bannāʾ *Diary*, ed. and trans. George Makdisi, “Autograph Diary of an Eleventh-Century Historian of Baghdad,” I: BSOAS 18/i (1956), 9-32; II: BSOAS 18/ii (1956), 239-260; III: BSOAS 19/i (1957), 13-48; IV: BSOAS 19/ii (1957), 281-303; V: BSOAS 19/iii (1957), 426-43. Re-printed in Makdisi, *History and Politics in Eleventh-Century Baghdad* (Brookfield, Vermont: Variorum, 1990).

<sup>24</sup> Makdisi, “Autograph Diary,” IV, Paragraph 140. Text: 289; Translation: 301.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, Paragraph 141. Text: 289; Translation: 301.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* V, par. 152; text 426; trans. 436.

It might seem counter-intuitive that the caliph would go to such great lengths to protect a Jewish official. Yet Ibn Faḍlān played an important role in the caliphate's monetary system. As the head of the *dīwān* and secretary to the sultan's wife, he used his connections with merchants and bankers throughout the empire to advance loans to the state whenever they were needed. The state, therefore, despite his Jewishness, had a vested interest in guaranteeing his security and ensuring that debts were paid back to him in a timely manner.

Instead, in dealing with the issue that had arisen between the Sheikh b. Jarada and Ibn Faḍlān, the caliph "asked him to pay down some money for Ibn Fadlan to the amount of 11,000 dinars, of which 5,000 as an immediate payment and 6,000 deferred for payment in annual instalments of 1,000 dinars."<sup>27</sup> Ibn Jarada was happy at this development, characterizing it as "the exceedingly good manner in which the caliph dealt with him, and that he had exerted his efforts in every way possible regarding the case."<sup>28</sup> What was important was that Ibn Jarada's debts were settled through legal means. Ibn Faḍlān could continue advancing money to the state whenever necessary.

This policy was illustrated even more through the narrative of the Jewish tax-collector Ibn 'Allān. According to the chronicler Ibn al-Athīr, Ibn 'Allān was such a skilled tax collector that he managed to extract much more revenue from the districts in the caliph's private domain (6,000 kurrs of corn, 100,000 dinars) than his vizier. As a result, according to Ibn al-Athīr, "the incompetence and weakness of [the vizier] became plain, so he was dismissed" in 1062. Niẓām al-Mulk, recognizing Ibn Allan's skills, took him under his protection, and Ibn 'Allan became very powerful and wealthy.<sup>29</sup> According to Ibn al-Athīr, "[t]he position of the Jew had grown so

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil*, 116; trans. Richards, 140.

great, that when his wife died, everyone in Basra except for the *qāḍī*, walked behind her bier.”<sup>30</sup>

In 1080, however, the sultan Malikshah arrived in Khuzistan to go hunting, along with two of his companions who “were both working to secure the death of Ibn Allan” in order to seize his money. The sultan ordered the drowning of Ibn ‘Allān and seized 100,000 dinars of his wealth.

In response,

[f]or three days Nizām al-Mulk withdrew from public appearance and locked his door. Later he was advised to appear at the ceremonial parade [for the sultan] which he did. He gave a great feast for the sultan, during which he presented him with many things but he criticized him for what he had done. The sultan made his excuses.<sup>31</sup>

Nizām al-Mulk owed his own status to Malikshah; in expressing his objections to Malikshah’s actions, Nizām al-Mulk was putting himself in danger. So why did Nizām al-Mulk jeopardize his own career (and possibly even his life) over the death of a Jewish tax collector? After all, Nizām al-Mulk was no friend of *dhimmī* government officials, and he had even written against the practice of employing them. Nevertheless, in this case, he needed to make a point: no one, not even a sultan, had the right to kill a wealthy man in order to seize his money. Such an action, while perhaps temporarily enriching the sultan, could only lead to ruin.

Overall, Nizām al-Mulk advocated protecting *dhimmī* financial officials, while gradually replacing non-Muslims with pious Muslims whenever possible. For example, the murdered Jewish tax farmer Ibn ‘Allān was replaced by a Muslim. Nizām al-Mulk brought in a new group of Sunni Muslim secretaries into the *diwān al-’inshā’* who were traditionally-minded. Courtly culture became characterized more by *ḥadīth* transmission than the kinds of philosophic inter-religious disputations that had predominated during the Buyid period.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *Kāmil*, 116; trans., Richards, 201.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., see also Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, VIII, 323.

<sup>32</sup> Ephrat, *Learned Society*, 125-49.

As a result, although Jewish officials continued to play a role in upholding the caliphate's financial system, as they had under the Abbasids and the Buyids, and may even have been subject to fewer violent raids, they did not enjoy the prestige that had once come with their positions. Instead, the Abbasids and the Seljuqs, encouraged by the '*ulamā*', tried to humiliate *dhimmī* officials as much as possible.

### Humiliating *Dhimmī* Officials

In order to promote their own status as the guardians of Sunni Islam and gain fuller control over state prerogatives, the '*ulamā*' encouraged both caliphs and sultans to issue rulings regulating and humiliating *dhimmīs*. These directives, most of which required *dhimmīs*, including government officials, to wear distinctive clothing, became increasingly oppressive and humiliating during the second half of the eleventh century. The *ghiyār* was imposed on *dhimmīs* in Seljuq Iraq in 1056, 1058, 1085, 1088, 1091, 1095, 1104, 1121, 1131, and 1145.<sup>33</sup> These rulings were often issued during times of acute political conflict between the Seljuqs and the Abbasids; by issuing such rulings, a given government official tried to promote himself as the legitimate defender of Islam and secure the loyalty of the '*ulamā*'.

For example, in 448/1056, according to Ibn al-Jawzī,

Abu Maṣṣūr Ibn Nāṣr al-Siyāra objected to the *ahl al-dhimma* and commanded them to wear the *ghiyārāt* and the *maṣbūghāt* (dyed) turbans (*amā'im*). This was according to the order of the sultan.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, VIII, 171; *Muntaẓam*, IX, 14; *Muntaẓam*, IX, 38; Richards, Ibn al-Athir, 248; Ibn al-Jawzī, IX, 55; *Muntaẓam*, IX, 91; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, IX, 143; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, IX, 228; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, X, 20; Ibn al-Fuṭayh, Talkhīṣ Majma' al-ādib fī mu'jam al-aqāb, ed. Muṣṭafā Jawād (Damascus: Wizārat al-thaqāfa wa al-irshād al-qawmī, 1962-65), Vol. III, 206.

<sup>34</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, VIII, 171.

This would have happened right after the caliph invited the Seljuqs into Baghdad, but while the Buyids were still nominally in control; perhaps, the sultan ordered the *ghiyār* in order to assert the Sunni character of the Seljuqs and gain the support of the population for them (over the Buyids).

Similarly, the caliph issued an order “that the *dhimmīs* should be compelled to wear their distinctive dress, to wear what the commander of the faithful Umar ibn al-Khattab had stipulated for them” in 1091.<sup>35</sup> This edict was issued around the time that the Seljuq sultan Malikshah reentered Baghdad and took interest in public works. Thus, by issuing this order—which would apply overwhelmingly to the administration—the caliph sought to advance his own position and demonstrate his continued influence, in opposition to the Seljuqs’ presence in Baghdad.

Although such rulings had been previously issued by al-Mutawakkil and al-Muqtadir, the extent to which they were enforced is unclear. During the Seljuq period, however, the *ghiyār* was increasingly imposed on high-level officials, and the clothing of *dhimmī* officials was subject to increased scrutiny. For example, the Jew Ibn Samḥā, a financial official who also acted as a steward of Nizām al-Mulk, wore a particularly large turban. But according to Ibn al-Athīr, in 1091,

A man selling carpets met [Ibn Samḥā] and gave him a blow which knocked his turban from his head. The man was seized, carried off to the *dīwān*, and questioned as to the reason for his action. He replied, ‘He treated me as inferior to himself.’<sup>36</sup>

In this anecdote, a humble carpet-seller declares himself the better of the commercial representative of the most powerful vizier of his age. The implication was clear; not even the highest ranked government officials could position themselves as of a higher-status than even the lowliest of Muslims. In Ibn al-Athīr’s narrative, the caliph issued the order requiring *dhimmīs* to

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<sup>35</sup> Richards, Ibn al-Athir, 186; trans., 248. Ibn al-Jawzī, Muntazam, IX, 55, lines 15ff.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

wear the *ghiyār* in response to the altercation between Ibn Samḥā and the Muslim carpet seller. The order stressed that it applied to *dhimmī* government officials.<sup>37</sup>

Both Jewish and Muslim sources indicate that the *ghiyār* rulings were intended to be as humiliating as possible, for *dhimmīs* in general, and *dhimmī* government officials, in particular. According to Ibn al-Jawzī, in 1091, *dhimmīs* were directed to wear not only the traditional *ghiyār*, but also distinguishing shoes and necklaces:

Distinguishing signs, girdles, and a lead coin stamped with the word *dhimmī* around their necks, and the same for women when entering the bathhouse; in addition [they must wear] black shoes and a black robe or a red shoe and anklets on their feet.<sup>38</sup>

The clear purpose of such a ruling was not just to distinguish *dhimmīs* from Muslims, but to humiliate them. By the time that Ovadya the Proselyte, an Italian native who converted to Judaism, traveled through Iraq (c. 1120), the memory of this edict was particularly potent.

Although his account of the specific restrictions imposed on *dhimmīs* differs slightly from that of Ibn al-Jawzī, it too indicates their profoundly humiliating nature:

The king of Adinah [Baghdad], whose name was al-Muqtadī, empowered his second in command, whose name was Abishuga to take discriminatory action against the Hebrews dwelling in the city of Adinah. He sought many times to cause them to perish, but the God of Israel thwarted his intent, this time also hiding them from his wrath. Abishuga put gleaming signs upon them, on the head of each and every Jew: one on the head and the other on the throat, and about a silver mithqal of lead hanging from the throat of each and every Jew, upon which was inscribed the word *dhimmi*—for the Jews were taxed. He moreover had a girdle placed around the loins of each and every Jew. Abishuga further had placed upon the Jewish women two signs: the shoes belonging to each and every woman had to be one red and the other black, while upon the throat of each and every women or upon her shoe was placed a small brass bell to make a noise so that one might clearly distinguish between the women of the Hebrews and the women of the gentiles.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, IX, 55, lines 15ff.

<sup>39</sup> Trans. Golb, "Obadaiah."

‘Ovadya went on to explain that the wearing of such humiliating clothing marked Jews out for special abuse:

He further appointed over the Jews cruel gentile men, while upon the Jewish women he appointed cruel gentile women, to oppress them with every kind of curse, spite, and shame. The gentiles would mock them; the people of the land, both they and their children would strike the Jews in all the areas of the city of Adinah (Baghdad).<sup>40</sup>

Both of these accounts suggest that the edicts regarding *dhimmī* dress and behavior issued during the Seljuq period were stricter and more humiliating than similar edicts issued in the past and were meant to apply to *dhimmī* government officials. Their goal, at which they succeeded, was to reduce the status and prestige of *dhimmīs*.

### Distinctly Anti- Jewish Edicts

The ‘*ulamā*’ resented the prominence of *dhimmīs* in all roles in administration. They reserved particular animosity towards *dhimmī* financial administrators, particularly such money-lenders as Ibn Samḥā. After all, these officials received special protection from the state at a time when the ‘*ulamā*’ hoped to minimize the role of *dhimmīs* in administration. Most Jews were not financial officials in the government, and, presumably, some Christians served as *jahbadhs*. Nevertheless, as a consequence more of historical vicissitudes than any deliberate choices, in Seljuq Baghdad, many prominent *jahbadhs* were Jews, and the most prominent Jews were *jahbadhs*. As a result, Baghdad’s Sunni chroniclers expressed particular animosity against Jewish *jahbadhs* and against Jews, in general.

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<sup>40</sup> Norman Golb, "Megillat obadiah hager" ("The Autograph Memoirs of Obadiah the Proselyte"): S.D. Goitein Jubilee Volume = Folklore Research Center Studies VI, ed. S. Morag et al. (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1980), Hebrew volume: 77-107.



In his autograph diary, Ibn al-Bannā' had only harsh words for the Jewish *jahbadh* Ibn Faḍlān, who was trying to collect a debt from one of his friends. Ibn al-Bannā' resented the lengths to which the caliph went in protecting Ibn Faḍlān. He denied the claim that the Bedouin who assaulted Ibn Faḍlān owed him a debt, saying, "[t]he people knew that this was an exaggeration on the part of Ibn Fadlan, so that he could say that they attacked him with the intention of killing him. If this were not an exaggeration, then whoever is after him would not have sought him out in such a public place." He went on to heap curses on the family of Ibn Faḍlān a few days later:

On Sunday the 29<sup>th</sup> of this month [1068], a male child was born to the Saharif Abu-l-GFhanā 'im. ... may god favor him! The brother of Ibn Faḍlān the Jew died on this same day (29 Safar). May God not have mercy on him!

But Ibn al-Bannā' 's antipathy towards Ibn Faḍlān extended to all Jews, regardless of their relationship to finance. In a poem that he wrote celebrating the birth of a son to the caliph al-Muqtadī, Ibn al-Bannā' wrote, "Glad tidings have come with this new-born child ... and may the curse of God be on the Jews!"<sup>41</sup> It is worth noting that Ibn al-Bannā' did not even mention Christians in his poem, let alone curse them. During a month in which the caliph had instructed a guard to protect a Jewish *jahbadh* against Ibn al-Bannā' 's fellow 'ālim, Ibn al-Bannā' reserved his antipathy for Jews.

Seljuq and Abbasid officials issued a number of distinctly anti-Jewish, rather than anti-*dhimmī* edicts. For example, in 1085, another son was born to the caliph al-Muqtadī, and his birth was accompanied by distinctly anti-Jewish sentiments and edicts. According to Ibn al-Jawzī,

A son was born to al-Muqtadī and he called him Ḥuseyn and his *kunya* was Abu 'Abd-allāh... And an edict was issued from the commander of the faithful [regarding] the situation of the Jews and their outward display of things forbidden

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<sup>41</sup> Ibn al-Bannā', *Diary*, III, Paragraph 60-61. Text: 16, Translation, 32.

to the *ahl al-dhimma*. That when they violate the stipulations [of the Pact of Umar], they nullify the covenant and its protection will be removed from them.<sup>42</sup>

In the same year, according to Ibn al-Jawzī,

An edict was issued from al-Muqtadī revoking the high rank of the Jews. And they locked their doors and enjoined the community to lower their voice in the reading of the Torah in their dwellings and make visible the *ghiyār* on their heads.”<sup>43</sup>

The specification of “the Torah” indicates that this ruling was specifically issued against the

Jewish community, as opposed to against *dhimmī* communities as a whole.<sup>44</sup> Three years later,

In 480/1088 a decree was issued regarding the situation of the Jews on Tariq Khurasan and Bilād Ibn Muzayd, informing that they were not wearing the *ghiyār* and wore their hair like the Turks and they were calling themselves with Muslim *kunyas* (nicknames).<sup>45</sup>

The account made no mention of rebellious Christians in this same region.

Similarly, according to Ibn al-Jawzī, the vizier Abu Shujā ‘ issued edicts specifically targeting Jewish merchants who closed their shops on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath in 1095:

[He] eliminated unlawful taxes and dressed the *ahl al-dhimma* in the *ghiyār* and ordered Ibn al-Kharqī the *muhtasib* to discipline everyone who opened his store on Friday and closed it on Saturday, from among the cloth merchants and others among them. And he said that this is idolatry for Jews [since it violates] their remembrance of the Sabbath.<sup>46</sup>

Abu Shujā ‘ explicitly stated that his instructions to the *muhtasib* were intended to adversely impact Jews, specifically.

Moreover, in 1121, when a ruling imposing the *ghiyār* on *dhimmīs* was issued, the exilarch (*jālūt*), appeared at court alone to pay a hefty bribe to the caliph and the sultan to abrogate the ruling; the chronicler made no indication to suggest that the Christian patriarch paid a similar bribe. Similarly, in 1145, Ibn al-Fuwatī reported that the sultan’s official specifically

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<sup>42</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, IX, 14.

<sup>43</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, IX, 17, lines 7ff.

<sup>44</sup> Hanne, *Caliph*, 102.

<sup>45</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, IX, 38.

<sup>46</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, IX, 91.

ordered “the Jews” to wear the *ghiyār*; no mention was made of whether a similar ruling was issued regarding Christians.

Overall, Muslim chroniclers did not devote a great deal of attention to events impacting non-Muslims. It is certainly possible that some of these rulings also targeted Christians, and chroniclers simply neglected to specify this because of their profound disinterest in *dhimmīs*. Nevertheless, I argue that the chroniclers’ references to such distinctly Jewish practices and institutions as the Sabbath on Saturdays, the reading of the Torah, and the exilarch were not arbitrary; rather, they suggest that Muslim elites were preoccupied specifically by Jews throughout the Seljuq period, a consequence, in part, of the persistence of Jewish *jahbadhs* in administration and the protection that they continued to receive.

## **Part II: Effect on Jewish Communal Rule**

How did this situation impact the operations of the yeshivot and Jewish communal leadership in Baghdad? Possibly, when Al-Qā’im issued the order re-imposing the *ghiyār* on *dhimmīs* in 1037, Jews interpreted it as a reinvigoration of the caliphate that would empower the exilarch, who derived his authority, in part, from his relationship to the Abbasid caliph. Indeed, the surviving records from the 1030s and 1040s suggest that this was the case. The exilarch referred to in the account was almost certainly Yeḥezqeyhu. The Cairo Geniza preserved at least three of his letters; in them, he promotes himself as the leader of both of the yeshivot of Baghdad and tries to assert their prerogatives in Egypt. Yeḥezqeyhu’s letter from 1036 to an unnamed communal official survived, in which he extended greetings on behalf of “the two yeshivot and all of the Sanhedrin and the sages,”<sup>47</sup> and promotes himself as representing both yeshivot. In the

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<sup>47</sup> T-S13J9.1; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc.67.

letter, he specifically solicited *she 'elot* from the recipient, indicating that in this capacity he took on some of the prerogatives of the Babylonian geonim. In another letter, from 1040 to the Babylonian community of Fustat, the exilarch writes, “[w]e are stubborn in commanding your communities to be obedient to Mar Rav Sahlan *Alluf* (the leader of the Babylonian community of Fustat) and to heed his word, for his words are our words.”<sup>48</sup> In another letter, he bestowed blessings upon the Nagid of Qayrawan, Ya‘aqov b. ‘Amram and in doing so, explicitly invoked the good graces of the gentile authorities:

May he rule over many nations, and may they not rule over him; may the mercy of the king and his advisors and his ministers and his forces be granted to him, and may he become great in the king’s house, and may he become famous in all of the provinces.<sup>49</sup>

By 1046, Yehezqeyhu was described as having actually taken over one of the yeshivot, although the merger of the exilarchate and the yeshiva appears not to have been permanent. None of these letters referred to discriminatory measures in Baghdad. After Yehezqeyhu’s death, a letter from 1056 refers to a separate gaon and exilarch operating in Baghdad.

The lack of Iraqi material found in the Geniza from the second half of the eleventh century suggests that there was a breakdown in relations between Jewish communities in Iraq and Egypt during the Seljuq period. The causes of the cessation of long-distance mercantile and political connections between Iraq and Egypt and its implications for Jewish communal rule will be discussed in Chapter 5. For the purposes of this chapter, however, the lack of Iraqi documents in the Cairo Geniza corpus makes it difficult to say much else about the specific operations of the yeshivot during the Seljuq period. Nevertheless, based on fragmentary Geniza material, Jacob

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<sup>48</sup> T-S Loan 40 (I); Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishamel*, doc. 68.

<sup>49</sup> T-S Loan 40 (II); Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, doc. 69.

Mann found evidence for the continued operation of two yeshivot and the exilarchate in Baghdad throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries.<sup>50</sup>

The main evidence for Jewish communal rule during the Seljuq period comes from historical chronicles composed by Sunni jurists. They indicate that, during this period, Jews continued to appeal to the state to mediate intra-communal disputes. In 1068, for example, Ibn al-Bannā' described the Jewish court banker Ibn Faḍlān as taking sides in a communal conflict over the selection of the exilarch:

One of our companions...informed me that dissention has risen to its highest point among the Jews; and that they wanted to appoint one particular son among the sons of David; but that Ibn Faḍlān opposed them and wanted to appoint someone else; and they are now disputing about that.<sup>51</sup>

Contemporaneous Jewish sources have not survived which would shed more light on this intra-communal conflict. Nevertheless, Ibn al-Bannā''s account portrays Ibn Faḍlān as acting in much the same way as his predecessors during the Abbasid and Buyid periods, using his close relationship to the state, as a *jahbadh*, to advocate for his allies within the Jewish community. It also seems Ibn Faḍlān's rivals also had such access to the state that both rival factions could advocate on behalf of their respective choices for the exilarchate. Interestingly, despite his antipathy toward Jews in general and Ibn Faḍlān in particular, Ibn al-Bannā' did not interpret this conflict as indicative of anything negative about Jews. If anything, in his account, the fact that the Jewish community was divided made them more, not less, like the Christians and the Muslims:

He continued: The Christians are also in disagreement with regard to a man who has given his daughter in marriage to someone not of his own religious community. The Nestorian Patriarch said: I have already excommunicated him, and his property has become licit for confiscation by the sultan of the Muslims. He added: And they are now in great difficulties. Now this is the most surprising thing that has happened

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<sup>50</sup> Mann, *Texts and Studies I*, 202-49.

<sup>51</sup> Ibn al-Bannā', *Diary*, II, Paragraph 92. Text: 25, trans. 43.

in one single month; namely that dissension should take place among the three religious communities: the Muslims, the Jews, and the Christians!<sup>52</sup>

There is no evidence in either Jewish or Muslim sources for how this intra-communal Jewish conflict was ultimately resolved. Yet Ibn Faḍlān is the last Jewish official from the Seljuq period we hear of who seems to have appealed directly to the state on behalf of a faction of Baghdad's rabbinic leadership. Instead, most subsequent accounts of *dhimmī* officials describe their reactions to the humiliating restrictions imposed on *dhimmī* communities during this period.

### Conversion as a Strategy of Resistance?

Muslim chroniclers from the Seljuq period often reported and celebrated the conversions of Christian officials in response to anti-*dhimmī* edicts. A great deal of Nestorian Christian secretaries were reported to have converted.<sup>53</sup> After Abu Shuja's harsh *ghiyār* rulings were issued in response to the altercation between the Jewish *jahbadh* Ibn Samha and the carpet-seller in 1091, according to Ibn Al-Athīr, the Christians Abu Sa'ad al-Ala ibn al-Hasan ibn Wahb ibn Musilaya, the secretary, and his nephew, Abu Nāṣir Hibat-Allāh ibn al-Ḥasan ibn 'Alī, the chief intelligence officer, both made their conversions "at the hands of the caliph."<sup>54</sup> After his conversion, Ibn al-Muslilaya was named replacement vizier for Abu Shujā'.

By contrast, Muslim chroniclers describe no conversions of Jewish *jahbadhs* to Islam. Indeed, not long after reporting the conversions of Ibn al-Muslilaya, Ibn al-Jawzī reported, "[i]n Shawawal [485/1092] Ibn Samḥa the Jew was killed."<sup>55</sup> The identification of Ibn Samḥa as a

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<sup>52</sup> Ibn al-Bannā', 92.

<sup>53</sup> Cecile Cabrol identified four Nestorian secretaries during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph Al-Qā'im, one of whom converted to Islam. Of the six Nestorian secretaries she identified during the reign of Al-Muqtadī (1075-1094), at least four converted to Islam. Cecile Cabrol, *Les Secretaires Nestoriens a Baghdad (762-1258)* (Beirut: 2012), 279.

<sup>54</sup> Ibn al-Athīr, 186; trans. Richards, 248.

<sup>55</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, ix, 63.

Jew, even in death, suggests that he never converted to Islam during his lifetime. All of this, then, raises the question of why it appears that so few Jewish *jahbadhs* converted to Islam to avoid being subject to the humiliating restrictions, when so many of their Christian counterparts did?

It is possible that this is merely a consequence of the limitations of our source material. The orthodox Sunni jurists who wrote historical chronicles during this period (and those who copied them) were not overly concerned with the differences between various *dhimmī* religious groups. They might have reported the conversions of Christian officials and just happened to leave out accounts relating to Jewish officials. Yet for the ‘*ulamā*’, the conversion of *dhimmī* government officials to Islam was cause for celebration. It demonstrated the superiority of Islam and ensured that fewer *dhimmīs* had positions of authority over Muslims. It seems unlikely that the chroniclers would have discussed Jewish *jahbadhs* by name and then later neglected to mention that these same individuals had converted to Islam.

It is also unlikely that Jews were more resistant to conversion than Christians. After all, there are many accounts of Jewish officials in other parts of the Islamic world converting during times of persecution or in order to raise their own status at court.<sup>56</sup> Maimonides had even ruled that it was permissible to convert to Islam under duress, provided that one inwardly remained loyal to Judaism.<sup>57</sup> The lack of accounts of Jewish conversion in medieval Iraq, therefore, is somewhat anomalous.

Perhaps Jewish *jahbadhs* did not convert due to the nature of their work as money-lenders, currency collectors, and mint officials. In particular, such Sunni jurists as Al-Ghazali

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<sup>56</sup> On the conversions of Jewish government officials to Islam, see Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 95-102.

<sup>57</sup> Joel Kraemer, *Maimonides: The Life and World of one of Civilization's Greatest Minds* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 107.

condemned Seljuq Iraq's entire monetary system as "un-Islamic"; marketplace transactions were not conducted using weight-regulated currency; instead, individuals used small coins cut from larger weight-regulated gold and silver dinars and dirhams called *quradat*, as well as coins from different circulation zones. This was a problem from the perspective of Islamic law, since the same amount of precious metal could be valued at different prices in the same transaction (e.g., if a coin from Egypt with the same gold content was valued differently from a coin from Syria), thus violating the prohibition on interest (*riba*).<sup>58</sup> Yet unlike in Christian Europe, Islamic law did not provide a loophole allowing non-Muslims to engage in usury. The *jahbadhs*' and mint officials' status as non-Muslims did not make the caliphate's monetary system any less problematic for Muslim jurists.<sup>59</sup>

Rather, it was the caliph who theoretically minted all coinage. Ibn al-Bannā' had reported a religious disputation in which a preacher was asked to interpret the *ḥadīth* "God descends at midnight to the heaven closest to Earth." He replied:

I wonder what you say when the caliph strikes the *dirham* and the *dīnār*; does one say: So-and-so the Jewish mint official (*al-yahūdī al-ḡarrāb*) struck them? Or does one say, 'The caliph (struck them).' They said, 'the caliph.' He said, thus, also, an angel descends and it is said: "God descends."<sup>60</sup>

It is noteworthy that here, the preacher automatically characterizes mint workers as Jews, suggesting that Jews predominated in this profession. At the same time, the interpretation of the *ḥadīth* makes clear that, regardless of the Jewish involvement in the actual minting of coins, it is the caliph who is most responsible for their content.

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<sup>58</sup> Stefan Heidemann, "Un-Islamic Taxes and an Un-Islamic Monetary System in Seljuq Baghdad: Protest of Legal and Religious Scholars in the Period of Al-Ghazali," *International Symposium on Baghdad in the Islamic Civilization* (Istanbul: 2011), 493-506.

<sup>59</sup> Ryan Calder, "God's Technicians: Religious Jurists and the Usury Ban in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," *European Journal of Sociology* 57, no.2 (2016): 207-257.

<sup>60</sup> Makdisi, *Diary*, IV, Paragraph 142. Text: 290; translation: 302.



According to the most virulent critics of Iraq's monetary system, anyone, regardless of religion, who took part in any transaction at the marketplace using coinage with different metallic content theoretically committed the same sin. Because of the extent to which the issue affected the entire population, Baghdad's religious and political leadership preferred to avoid discussing it too explicitly, as it might challenge the legitimacy of their rule. When an official in the Madrasa Nizamiyya preached harshly against the use of *quradat* coins, he was kicked out of the madrasa and forced to flee the city of Baghdad.<sup>61</sup> Despite their antipathy towards *dhimmi* government officials, the Sunni scholars did not single out *dhimmi* financial administrators in their condemnations of the caliphate's monetary system.

So why then did Iraq's Jewish *jahbadhs* not convert during the Seljuq period? Their Jewishness must have continued to provide them with some sort of benefit, even during a time of persecution. *Jahbadhs* were part of long-distance mercantile networks. They needed to form associations with as wide a network of merchants in as many different cities as possible in order to maintain their wealth and access to credit. Perhaps the *jahbadhs*' Jewishness played a role in their ability to form and maintain these relationships with merchants throughout the Islamic world.

Previous scholars assumed that Geniza merchants' activities reflect wider practices in the Islamic world, that there was nothing distinctly "Jewish" about their activities. Jessica Goldberg and Phillip Ackerman-Lieberman's recent work complicates this assumption. On the one hand, Jewish merchants did engage Muslim agents, and sometimes these relationships lasted for many years. In doing so, they often relied on informal, *suhba* partnerships, rather than formal written contracts. When they did draw up written contracts, Geniza merchants composed them in such a

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

way that they could be enforced in Islamic courts, and they gave testimony before both Jewish and Muslim notaries.<sup>62</sup> Even if a given merchant converted to Islam, he could still have an agency relationship with others in the network and make use of Islamic courts.

Yet Goldberg's analysis shows a preference for agency relationships with other Jews. Jewish merchants brought disputes to Jewish courts; using a power of attorney, they appointed agents to advance their own affairs in Jewish courts in different political jurisdictions. Moreover, Phillip Ackerman-Lieberman argues that Jewish merchants during the Geniza period made sure to compose contracts according to Jewish partnership law, even when this differed from Islamic partnership law.<sup>63</sup> To do this, both parties needed to appear, together, in person, at a Jewish court. In Baghdad, the *jahbadhs* had cultivated close relations with the geonim, who appointed judges throughout Iraq and Persia, likely helping to ensure that their interests would be protected in Jewish courts. The economic networks cultivated by Jewish *jahbadhs* thus relied, in part, on Jewish legal institutions, which could only be used by Jews. Jewish *jahbadhs* might have preferred to maintain these relationships with other Jewish merchants in Jewish courts, rather than convert to Islam and risk losing these associations altogether.

### Jewish Resistance Strategies

Nevertheless, Jewish government officials in the Seljuq period did not accept the *ghiyār* rulings passively. Like their predecessors, they were skilled at navigating courtly politics, and they tried to use their connections with rival officials to abrogate them. Because the Seljuq period was marked by a great deal of competition for the control of state prerogatives—between

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<sup>62</sup> Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions*, ##.

<sup>63</sup> Phillip Ackerman-Lieberman, *The Business of Identity: Jews, Muslims, and Economic Life in Medieval Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

sultan and caliph and between rival officials within a given household—they had a degree of success.

Sometimes, Jewish officials may have appealed for help to their individual patrons. The Jew Abu ‘Alī ibn Faḍlān served as *jahbadh* and secretary to Khātūn, the wife of the Seljuq sultan. In 1056, when the sultan issued a decree imposing the *ghiyār* on *dhimmīs*, according to Ibn al-Jawzī, “Khātūn averted it from them and she prevented the *muḥtasib* [from enforcing it].”<sup>64</sup> It is possible Ibn Faḍlān, played a role in persuading her to block her husband’s order.

In 1091, the Jew Ibn Samḥā had complained to Nizām al-Mulk about Abu Shujā’s actions. Nizām al-Mulk wanted to advance the power of the sultan against the caliph. After hearing this complaint, he was able to remove Abu Shujā ‘ from office and banish him from the city of Baghdad. As Ibn al-Jawzī wrote,

On Thursday, 9 Ramadan, an edict was issued removing the vizier Abu Shuja, and the reason for this was that compatriots of the sultan complained about him, and that happened to incline Nizām towards his removal. So he gave assurance to his associates, and the sultan wrote to the caliph complaining about him and that happened to anger the caliph over his actions.<sup>65</sup>

In 498/1104, according to Ibn al-Jawzī, the sultan cancelled *dhimmī* restrictions “but the reason was not known.”<sup>66</sup> This too was a time of political uncertainty; Nizām al-Mulk, the caliph al-Muqtadī, and the Seljuq sultan Malikshah had all been killed, creating a power vacuum. It is possible that *dhimmī* officials within the government were able to take advantage of the chaos to convince someone to abrogate the *ghiyār* ruling in secret, such that a later chronicler had no idea how or why the new ruling had been issued.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, VIII, 171.

<sup>65</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, ix, 56.

<sup>66</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, IX, 143.

During a time of financial and political stress, Jewish leaders paid a great deal of money to the state in exchange for abrogating the *ghiyār*. For example, according to Ibn al-Jawzī, in [515/1121] “the sultan...demanded that the *ahl al-dhimma* wear the *ghiyār*, and the matter was resolved when they paid the caliph 4,000 and the sultan 20,000 dinars, and the exilarch (*jālūt*) appeared to guarantee it and collected it.”<sup>67</sup> The bribe was temporarily successful, but ten years later, “[i]n Rajab (525H/1131) the *ghiyār* was imposed on the *ahl al-dhimma*.”<sup>68</sup>

Sometimes *dhimmī* officials fled and sought refuge with rival political authorities rather than subject themselves to humiliating clothing restrictions. For example, in response to Abu Shuja’s order of 1091, according to Ibn al-Athīr, many *dhimmī* government officials “fled to various hideaways.”<sup>69</sup> Similarly, according to a biographical account of Fakhr al-Dīn, the *sāhib* of the Seljuq sultan Masūd, the sultan ordered the imposition of the *ghiyār* on *dhimmīs* in 1145, and in response, the Jews took refuge in the caliph’s palace complex (*Dār al-Khilāfa*). The people of the *Dār al-Khilāfa* complained that Jews were crowding the bathhouses there, but the caliph allowed the Jews to remain. Fakhr al-Dīn responded, “Whoever hates living with them [the Jews] could move anywhere he pleased.”<sup>70</sup> This conflict took place during a time of acute financial tensions between the caliph and the sultan.<sup>71</sup> Perhaps by granting refuge to Jewish *jahbadhs*, the caliph hoped to regain control of his treasury. The sultan’s response, encouraging those residing in the *Dār al-Khilāfa* to relocate, was likely an attempt to convince the caliph’s allies to join the Seljuqs.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam* IX, 228.

<sup>68</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam* X, 20.

<sup>69</sup> Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil*, 176. Trans. Richards, 248.

<sup>70</sup> Ibn al-Fuwaṭī, *Talkhis* III, 206.

<sup>71</sup> Hanne, *Putting the Caliph in his Place*, 79-80.

Thus, Jewish government officials were able to exploit the tensions between the Abbasid caliphs and the Seljuq sultans to attain some of their goals. Nevertheless, the Seljuq period marked a significant change in the Jewish relationship to the state and the ability of Jews to appeal to the state in their own intra-communal politics.

Before the Seljuq period, when an intra-communal conflict over leadership broke out, officials on both sides did not hesitate to appeal to the state. This had depended on many Jews holding positions of prestige in the government, such that rival factions could appeal to different officials to intercede on their behalf before the state. Both the exilarch and various Jewish court bankers had acted as communal advocates, and they often ended up opposing each other when petitioning the state. Under the Buyids, with the decline of the caliph's authority, the influence of the exilarch likely declined. Few sources from the Buyid period refer to the exilarch, yet a relatively large number of Jewish court bankers were employed by competing Buyid rulers and viziers and were able to appeal to different officials to advance their own interests. In contrast to the situation under the earlier Abbasids, the court bankers were increasingly marginalized and humiliated under the Seljuqs.

With the decline in status of Jewish *jahbadhs*, the exilarch, instead, became the primary Jewish communal representative at court by the end of the eleventh century. He, alone, appeared to pay the community's bribes to the caliph and sultan. Without the ability to appeal to court bankers to advocate on their behalf in the same way as before, the geonim and other Jewish communal leaders were entirely dependent on the exilarch to manage their relationship with the government, and they had no longer had any other recourse to challenge his rule.

The unprecedented harsh treatment of Jews by the state as exemplified by the anti-*dhimmī* and distinctly anti-Jewish edicts, coupled with the lack of access to state power and

institutions of justice, provoked a crisis of political ideals among Jews. Unable to petition the state to address their grievances, many rejected the political order of their present in favor of an eschatological future.

### **Part III: Messianism as Political Resistance**

Messianic fervor pervaded all levels of Islamicate Jewish society throughout the Middle Ages. A central tenet of medieval Judaism was a belief “with perfect faith” in the imminent coming of the Messiah who would cast off the yolk of gentile rule and restore Davidic kingship in the Land of Israel. This hope represented a subaltern community’s visions of an inverted world order, free from gentile oppression.

Still, messianic ideology was not necessarily indicative of a reaction to specific historical events, nor was messianism inherently destabilizing. As Gershom Scholem has argued, messianic fervor was an integral part of Jewish tradition.<sup>72</sup> Throughout the medieval period, rabbinic leaders, while exhorting their flock to pray for the coming of the messiah, generally encouraged their followers to accept their lot in life, defer to rabbinic authority, and wait patiently. In this way, messianic ideology, though potentially subversive, was used to advance the existing social and political order. If not kept under control, however, messianic movements in both Islam and Judaism could also constitute an existential threat to the political order. As Goitein writes, “Although such movements had an essentially religious root. ... their goal was political power.”<sup>73</sup> The followers of a messiah stopped paying taxes and engaging in economic

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<sup>72</sup> Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).

<sup>73</sup> S. D. Goitein, “A Report on Messianic Troubles in Baghdad in 1120-1121,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 43, no. 1 (July 1952), 66.

activities. In some cases, they even gathered weapons and engaged in armed resistance against the state. Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Iraq all participated in these movements.

Jewish and non-Jewish sources describe the outbreak of destabilizing Jewish messianic movements in Iraq during the Seljuq period. Two of the accounts were preserved in travel literature: the fragmentary autograph memoir of ‘Ovadaya the Proselyte found in the Cairo Geniza and the travelogue of Benjamin of Tudela (c. 1173). A third is found in the work of Samū’al al-Maghribī, a Jewish apostate (d. 1180).<sup>74</sup> These texts were all constructed to serve different polemical purposes. Whereas ‘Ovadya, a Christian convert to Judaism, traveled throughout the Islamic world and was concerned with messianic movements and Benjamin, who likely heard the story from Jews who continued to believe in the veracity of the movement, emphasized the miracles performed by the messianic figure, Samū’al used the narrative of Jews following a false messiah to emphasize the inherent irrationality of adherents to Judaism. Their inconsistencies aside, they attest to the existence of an actual messianic movement (or multiple such movements) originating in the Hakkari region of Kurdistan, in upper Mesopotamia, led by a certain Sulaymān ibn Ruhī and his son, Menahem. Norman Golb understood the movements as a response to the impact of the Crusader conquests in that region. Individuals may have interpreted the constant battles, as well as the Crusaders’ wresting of Jerusalem from Islamic rule, as apocalyptic events.<sup>75</sup>

I argue that understanding these movements merely as the inevitable reaction to the Crusader conquests on the part of an unsophisticated population obfuscates the political logic of their founders. The narratives make clear that the movement was led, not by uneducated popular

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<sup>74</sup> Moshe Perlmann, “Silencing the Jews,” *Proceedings of American Academy of Jewish Research* 32 (1964).

<sup>75</sup> Norman Golb, “The Messianic Pretender Solomon Ibn al-Ruji and His Son Menahem (The So-Called ‘David al-Roy’),” (Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, 2009), 7-8.

preachers, but by individuals with deep ties to institutions of Jewish communal leadership in Baghdad, individuals who themselves might otherwise have had claims to communal authority. In Benjamin's account, for example, the leader of the messianic movement was a rebellious member of the yeshiva hierarchy:

[He] studied under Hisday Rosh Golah and under the Rosh Yeshivat Gaon Ya 'aqov in the city of Baghdad, and he was well versed in the Law of Israel, in the Halakha as well as the Talmud and all the wisdom of the Muslims, also in secular literature and in the writings of magicians and soothsayers.<sup>76</sup>

Similarly, in Samū'al's account, the messianic pretender was well-educated in Jewish law and even enjoyed relations with the local government:

By the standards of the rank and file of Jews dwelling in the district known as Amadia in the country of Mosul, he was well-versed in their religion. The commander of a fortress there was so kindly disposed toward this imposter of whom he had formed a good opinion and whose feigned piety impressed him that he used to look forward to visiting this man.<sup>77</sup>

In both narratives, the false messiahs were mounting rebellions against the Jewish authorities of their own day.

Both Samū'al and Binyamin described the movement in distinctly political terms, as constituting a rebellion against the state to raise an army to ultimately defeat the gentiles and reconquer Jerusalem. In Samū'al's account, "The imposter coveted the place of the governor whom he considered a simpleton, and imagined that he would be able to pounce upon the fortress and take it over, that it might become his fortified stronghold."<sup>78</sup> Similarly, according to Benjamin, "He conceived the idea of rebelling against the king of Persia and of collecting the

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<sup>76</sup> Translation: Adler, *Travels*, 50.

<sup>77</sup> Translation: Perlmann, *Silencing the Jews*, 72.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.



Jews who live in the mountains of Khafton to go forth and to fight against all the nations, and to march and capture Jerusalem.”<sup>79</sup>

These movements had dangerous consequences for the Jewish community of the caliphate as a whole, not just for those Jews who participated in them directly. The gentile authorities tried to brutally suppress these movements. In ‘Ovadya’s account, around the same time, the caliph expelled a messianic pretender named Ibn Shaddad from a town near Baghdad (Ba ‘aquba) and all of his followers into prison. The manuscript is fragmentary, so it is unclear what happened after their arrest. In Benjamin’s account, the state also intervened to suppress Suleymān’s rebellion:

The king of Persia sent word to the commander of the faithful, the exilarch, and the Rosh Yeshivat Gaon Ya ‘aqov to restrain [Suleymān] from executing his designs. And he threatened that he would otherwise slay all the Jews in his Empire. Then all the congregations of the land of Persia were in great trouble.<sup>80</sup>

According to Benjamin, the Jewish authorities of Baghdad warned Suleymān that his visions were false, and they threatened him with excommunication. Still, he refused, and eventually a vassal of the king of Persia bribed his father-in-law to kill him. But then,

The king of Persia went forth against the Jews that lived in the mountains; and they sent to the Head of the Captivity to come to their assistance and to appease the king. He was eventually appeased by a gift of 100 talents of gold, which they gave him, and the land was at peace thereafter.<sup>81</sup>

Why did the Islamic government intervene to suppress a Jewish messianic movement?

Although medieval Islamic states used violence and the threat of violence to enforce their rule, they nonetheless required the assent of their population, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, in order to govern. Messianic movements among Jews, like messianic movements among Muslims, still

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<sup>79</sup> Translation: Adler, *Travels*, 50-51.

<sup>80</sup> Translation: Adler, *Travels*, 52.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

had the potential to threaten this fragile social and political order. Jewish messianic movements, therefore, represented a political crisis, for the state as a whole and for the Jewish political leadership in Baghdad, in particular. The exilarch still depended on the state to enforce his rule among Jews. Although the status of Jewish court bankers had declined, their work still depended on the population continuing to engage in economic activities, and Baghdad's Jewish leadership needed to convince their population of the futility and danger of joining messianic movements. This explains why the previous messianic narratives emphasized that the messianic leaders had not made ignorant mistakes in interpreting contemporaneous events as harbingers of the imminent coming of the messiah; instead, they lied to manipulate innocent victims who did not know better into serving their own political ends. As Benjamin wrote, "[h]e showed signs by pretended miracles to the Jews and said, 'The Holy One, blessed be he, sent me to capture Jerusalem and to free you from the yolk of the gentiles.' And the Jews believed in him and called him their Messiah." Similarly, Samū'al wrote,

So he wrote to the Jews who dwelled in the various districts of the country of Adharbayjān and the adjacent territory, knowing as he did that the Persian Jews are the most ignorant of all Jews. In his writings, he mentioned that he was a leader zealous to free the Jews from the hands of the Muslims, and he addressed the Jews with various ruses and deceptions.<sup>82</sup>

In this narrative, as well, the messianic pretender plots to deceive the ignorant Jews of Persia.

#### A Tale of Relief after Punishment: Elijah and the Caliph

Still, in order to truly suppress such destabilizing movements, Baghdad's Jewish leadership needed to acknowledge the reasons why individuals might be drawn to such movements in the first place: the very real persecutions that the Jewish community encountered,

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<sup>82</sup> Perlmann, "Silencing the Jews," 72-3.

particularly under Seljuq rule, and the failure of the state to respond to their grievances. They also needed to reassure their followers that, even though following a messianic movement was dangerous, the messiah would come soon and free them from gentile oppression.

To this end, Baghdad's Jewish leadership disseminated a Judeo-Arabic epistle detailing some miraculous events that took place in Baghdad in 1121. The epistle was copied years later and preserved along with a shorthand Passover Haggadah in a codex found in the Cairo Geniza. Goitein published the text in 1952 and argued that it represented ostensibly historical events that took place in Seljuq Baghdad.<sup>83</sup> As Arnold Franklin and Miriam Frenkel argue, the narrative is a typological retelling of the biblical Book of Esther.<sup>84</sup> Like the book of Esther, it depicts

the near destruction and miraculous salvation of a local community, a scheming government official who is responsible for the Jews' predicament, a young and pious female heroine, and a wise and sympathetic gentile who recognizes God's unfailing concern for the Jewish people.<sup>85</sup>

Its preservation along with a Passover Haggadah suggests that, for medieval Jews, its significance lay less in its recollection of specific historical events but in its relationship to Jewish liturgical memory. Like the Haggadah, it recounts a narrative of oppression, salvation, and future messianic redemption at the hand of the prophet Elijah.

The text's literary character and preservation implies that it does not represent an accurate account of historic events. Nevertheless, as Goitein recognized, it contains the names of real individuals who lived in Baghdad during this period, including the vizier Abu Shujā; the Seljuq sultan and the Abbasid caliph; the *qāḍī* Ibn Al-Dāmaghānī; as well as a Jewish government official, Sahl ibn Kammūna. Although the events were largely fictionalized, the

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<sup>83</sup> S. D. Goitein, "A Report on Messianic Troubles in Baghdad in 1120-1121," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 43, no. 1 (July 1952): 57-76.

<sup>84</sup> Franklin, *This Noble House*, 150-2.

<sup>85</sup> Miriam Frenkel, "Geniza Documents as Literary Products," in *From a Sacred Source* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 151-4.

writer was clearly familiar with the upper echelons of Baghdadi society, both Jewish and Muslim, in the early twelfth century.

Some pages are missing, but enough of the manuscript is preserved to reconstruct the narrative. The text begins by asserting that it will tell a tale of “relief after the punishment that befell them [the Jews] in this exile [*al-galut*] for many years.”<sup>86</sup> It explains that “the root of these calamities was an evil man named Abu Shujā,” almost certainly a reference to the vizier who had tried to impose the *ghiyār* on *dhimmī* government officials. The text continues, by describing how Abu Shujā ‘ had imposed the *ghiyār* on women and the Jews paid 1,000 dinars to get this ruling revoked. This state of affairs persisted for many years until the year 1431 according to the Seleucid calendar. In Elul of that year, “the pious daughter of Yosef ben al-Ḥakīm (son of the doctor) declared that she saw the prophet Elijah in her dream, and he told her that “the redemption of Israel was at hand.” When the Seljuq sultan found out about this, he declared this a threat to the Islamic state, “because the Jews would not allow the continued existence of a single independent realm after the establishment of their own kingdom.” Upon hearing this, the caliph had all of the Jews imprisoned in the imperial mint (*dār al-ḍarb*). The caliph declared that the Jews’ “time is up” unless they became Muslims or a new prophet appeared among them. But the *qāḍī* warned the caliph, “[n]o person who had ever done evil to the Jewish people remained unpunished, and the Jewish people will endure forever.” The Jews, meanwhile, remained imprisoned, fasting and praying for deliverance. Then, Abu Sahl ibn Kammūna appeared miraculously freed from prison at the house of the exilarch, who was praying and fasting. Ibn Kammūna was called to appear before the caliph. The caliph did not believe the story that he had been freed from prison through the girl’s vision of Elijah; he declared that the Jews were clearly

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<sup>86</sup> Goitein, “Messianic Report,” 73.

stupid if they believed the testimony of a woman, and he ordered that the girl be burned the next day and the Jews outlawed. But that night, Elijah appeared to the caliph in a dream, and he was “struck with awe.” After that, he exempted the Jews from taxes. But the Jews instead bribed the viziers and nobles to succeed in having their exemption from taxes kept a secret. The narrative concludes by reminding the Jews that “the *Jizya* is a benefit to them, and if it was taken from them it would cause them hardship.”<sup>87</sup>

As Frenkel argues, the narrative is sensitive to messianic yearnings and treats the girl’s visions as authentic. Throughout this catastrophe, Elijah was working behind the scenes to save the Jewish people. He freed Ibn Kammūna from prison and appeared to the caliph, causing him to rescind his decree. In this way, the story, like others in the “relief after adversity” genre popular in the medieval Islamic world, reassured its audience that the messiah’s arrival was imminent.<sup>88</sup>

Stories of pious women were common during the Seljuq period, but I argue that the figure of the girl served another purpose as well. The messianic movements that had plagued Iraq’s Jewish community during the Seljuq period were led by men rebelling against the existing Jewish communal leadership. In composing a moralizing tale about such movements, however, the Baghdad leadership chose to depict the rebellious messianic preacher as an innocent girl. In doing so, they were able to discuss and be sympathetic to messianic movements without naming or even alluding to those rebelling against them.

Indeed, Frenkel and Franklin argue that the story’s purpose was to warn its audience against “potentially treasonous and dangerous eschatological fantasies.” As Frenkel writes,

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<sup>87</sup> MS Heb.f.56, 19r.,l.9-11. Goitein, “Messianic Report,” 76.

<sup>88</sup> E.g., see William Brinner (ed.), *An Elegant Composition Concerning Relief after Adversity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

The plot as described above conveys a clear anti-messianic approach: the messianic uprising in the story causes significant trouble for the Jews. It was only by the divine interference of the prophet Elijah that the Jews were rescued from the annihilation that was a potential consequence of this movement. The story's moral is that Jews should endeavor to maintain their present *dhimmī* status and to pay their *jizya* tax in order to maintain their secure lives. Any attempt to change their status would necessarily bring about hardship and calamity.<sup>89</sup>

In advancing this narrative, Baghdad's Jewish leadership evaluated their relationship with the state differently from their predecessors. Under the earlier Abbasids, Baghdad's geonim had a positive view of the Abbasid caliph, and they used their close relations with the Abbasid state to advance their own prestige among Jews as far away as Egypt. Under the Buyids, they were skeptical of the corruptions inherent in relations with the state, but they did not characterize the state as inherently oppressive. Yet in contrast to the geonim of the tenth century, Baghdad's twelfth century Jewish leaders did not celebrate their relationship with the Abbasid state or its ability to grant privileges and favors to Jews. Instead, under the Seljuqs, Jewish leaders advocated quiescence; it was best to keep a low profile and to abide by the restrictions imposed on *dhimmīs*, while knowing that the messiah would come in due time.

## Conclusion

The Seljuq period marked a turning point in the relationship between Baghdad's Jews and the Abbasid Caliphate. Previously, the Jewish relationship to the state was "jagged." Jews had multiple ways of accessing state power, and they often appealed to the state to petition against miscarriages of justice, including those performed by their co-religionists. Under the earlier Abbasids, the exilarch as well as various Jewish court bankers could appeal to the state on behalf of their allies within the community. Under the Buyids, the centralized government had

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<sup>89</sup> Frenkel, "Geniza Documents," 153-4.

collapsed, but political fragmentation had worked to the Jewish community's advantage; a relatively large number of Jews worked as bankers and secretaries for various rival Buyid leaders and continued to use these relationships to advance the interests of their allies within the Jewish community. But under the Seljuqs, the status of Jewish court bankers declined, as the '*ulamā*' became more prominent in state administration and tried to marginalize *dhimmī* government officials (and *dhimmīs* in general) as much as possible. Although they were not successful in eliminating Jews from financial administration, they did succeed in marginalizing them.

By the end of the eleventh century, with the decline in status and influence of Jewish court bankers, the exilarch had become the definitive representative of the Jewish community at court. Unable to appeal to the state during times of intra-communal conflict as they once had, Jews expressed their political frustrations in messianic terms. The communal leadership responded with a clear anti-messianic message in favor of quiet acquiescence to the state.

Many of the worst anti-Jewish measures enacted during the Seljuq period had been due to the competition between the Abbasid caliphs and the Seljuqs for control over key state prerogatives and for the ability to promote themselves as legitimate Islamic leaders. But the Abbasid caliphs managed to remove the Seljuqs from Baghdad by 1160, and they ruled over the city without any external interference until the Mongol conquest in 1258. In 1170, the Ayyubids of Egypt swore allegiance to the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad, symbolically uniting most of the eastern Islamic world under the banner of the Abbasid caliph once more. How did this new political order impact Jews? Did the caliphs continue the anti-*dhimmī* policies of the Seljuq period? Or, without the need to compete to promote themselves as legitimate Islamic leaders against the Seljuqs, did "the *dhimmī* question" become less central to Abbasid political life? Chapter 4 will explore the answers to these questions.

#### Chapter 4: “None of the concerns that require a king?” Jewish Political Realignment in the Independent Caliphate, 1161-1258

In the year 1209 (605H), the Abbasid caliph al-Nāṣir li-Din Allah (r. 1180-1225) appointed Dāniyāl b. al-‘Azar b. Hibat-Allāh as the “Head of the Academy (yeshiva) of the Jews” (*Ra’is Mathībat al-Yahūd*) and issued him a document of investiture. Dāniyāl then read the document out loud to the Jews in the synagogue in Baghdad. The document gave Dāniyāl authority over the Jews under his jurisdiction in “Baghdad and the districts of Iraq”:

Let him be regarded in this capacity by all places which are customarily subject to his administration and disposal. He may distinguish himself from his fellows by the garb permitted to people of his rank. It is the duty of the Jewish community and its judges in Baghdad and the districts of Iraq to submit to that which he orders, to demean themselves according to his word in the disposition of their affairs, and to act according to the degree required thereby. They must allow him all those rights customarily claimed by his predecessors in this dignity, in all places over which his administration extends without opposing any resistance to him therein.<sup>1</sup>

This document is rather surprising. In contrast to the negative depictions of ostentatiously dressed Jewish officials during the Seljuq period, it characterizes Dāniyāl b. al-‘Azar b. Hibat-Allah in respectful terms by referring to his “spotlessness of character” and gives him permission to wear special clothing. Moreover, whereas during the previous centuries of Abbasid rule, the exilarchs had received caliphal investiture, the geonim did not. Yet according to this document copied by the Muslim chronicler Ibn al-Sā‘ī, the gaon Shemu’el b. ‘Eli Ibn al-Dastūr and his successor, El‘azar b. Hillel b. Fahd had received similar documents of investiture before.<sup>2</sup> Arabic chronicles from the thirteenth and fourteenth century record documents of investiture for subsequent geonim.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibn al-Sā‘ī, *al-Jami‘ al-Mukhtaṣar*, ed. M. Jawād (Baghdad, 1934), 266-269. Translation in Fischel, *Jews in the Economic Life*, 128-129.

<sup>2</sup> The surviving portions of Ibn al-Sā‘ī’s chronicle does not begin until the year 595H.



Why did the geonim begin to receive caliphal investiture during the second half of the twelfth century? And what implications did their new political status have for Jewish communal rule and the ways in which Jewish leaders came to project their authority during the final years of the Abbasid caliphate?

This chapter begins with an overview of the political developments in the Abbasid caliphate in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century. I consider how these changes might have led to the granting of investiture to the geonim and temporarily increased the status and prestige of the various Jewish officials at the Abbasid court. The next section considers the impact of these political and administrative changes on the operations of the Jewish community itself. Jewish leaders used the threat of appealing to the state as a way of enforcing their rule, and, in marked contrast to the situation in the past, they were able to do so without the intercession of such other Jewish officials as *jahbadhs* at court. I also consider the implications of this new arrangement on the way in which the geonim and the exilarch in Baghdad promoted their authority in relation to each other. The chapter concludes by considering how the geonim and their allies, now officially part of Abbasid administration, characterized their relationship to the Abbasid state during the final years of the caliphate.

## **Part I: Abbasid Politics**

The second half of the twelfth century and first few decades of the thirteenth century represent a major turning point in the political and social history of the Abbasid caliphate. After the Abbasid caliph defeated the Seljuqs in Baghdad in 1156, he maintained full independent control over Baghdad until the Mongol conquest in 1258. During this period, many of the struggles for caliphal legitimacy that had marked the previous two centuries waned.

First, the Seljuq threat, both physical and ideological, largely subsided. Although the Seljuqs remained in Iraq until 1194, they were greatly weakened and never again received recognition from the Abbasid caliphs. And, perhaps most significantly, the Fatimids, who as a Shiite dynasty represented perhaps the greatest ideological threat to the caliphate, had effectively lost power. The Ayyubids officially took control of the Fatimid caliphate in 1169, and in 1171 they had the *khutba* in Egypt recited in the name of the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad. Although, with the exception of the defeat of the Seljuqs, the Abbasid caliph did little to facilitate these events, they represented his biggest triumph: they both confirmed the legitimacy of his rule and eliminated most political and ideological alternatives.<sup>3</sup>

In the absence of the political and ideological challenges of the Seljuqs, and the Fatimids, many of the religious and social conflicts that had characterized Baghdad's society during the Seljuq era lost some of their urgency. No longer did the Abbasid caliph need to compete for legitimacy with rival Sunni leaders (the Seljuq sultans) in Iraq. And, without a Shiite caliph to claim the loyalties of his Shiite subjects, the conflict between Sunni and Shiite lost much of its political significance.

Instead of devoting attention to the kinds of religious conflicts that had characterized their rule in the past, the caliphs during this period focused on consolidating their rule over their territory and population, regardless of sectarian affiliation. To the consternation of the Ayyubids, who sought their help in defeating the remaining Crusaders in Syria, the Abbasid caliphs devoted most of their military attention to suppressing rebellious Sunni Arab tribes on the eastern borders of the caliphate.

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<sup>3</sup> Hartmann, "al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh."

Within their territory, the caliphs sought to bring all factions of the Muslim population, Sunni and Shiite alike, under their direct rule and influence. For example, in 1165, the caliph al-Mustanjid held a special meeting to bestow lavish gifts on all of the notables of Baghdad's population, a practice that his successors al-Mustadī and al-Nāṣir would also follow.<sup>4</sup> Unlike such ceremonies in the ninth and tenth centuries, these did not involve the declaration of Islamic creeds. Moreover, these ceremonies involved groups that had previously been considered enemies, including 'Alids and Sufi orders. His successor, al-Mustadī, attended religious disputations, built mosques, and repaired Baghdad's infrastructure. He also, for the first time, patronized Sufi *riḥāṭs*.<sup>5</sup>

The next caliph, al-Nāṣir (r. 1180-1225) took these measures even further, embarking on an ambitious program of administrative and ideological reforms to reestablish the office of the caliph as the supreme political and religious authority in the Islamic world and to promote the unity of Islam above all else. On the political level, he suppressed rebellious Sunni tribes and made strategic alliances, ultimately kicking the Seljuqs out of their last strongholds in Iraq by 1194.<sup>6</sup>

But it was al-Nāṣir's reforms of Iraq's social structure that were most significant. Since the Buyid period, Iraq's society had been characterized by its many social groups, such as the *futuwwa* (mystical brotherhoods) outside of the direct control of the state. Previous caliphs had struggled to contain these groups. But al-Nāṣir succeeded in inducting himself into the *futuwwa*, and he demanded that the government officials subordinate to him did so as well. As a result, the *futuwwa* came under the direct purview of the caliph, and they now served as an organ of his

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<sup>4</sup> Hanne, *Putting the Caliph in his Place*, 163.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 163-85.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 186-187.

rule. On the religious level, he promoted himself as a *mujtahid*, a trustworthy transmitter of *ḥadith*, for all four Sunni *madhhabs*. He patronized Sufi *ribats* and *madrasas* and appointed their leaders.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, he surrounded himself with Shiite leaders and cultivated their loyalty, promoting himself as a descendant of ‘Alī. He positioned himself as the Sheikh of certain Sufi orders in Iraq, and he outlawed the others.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, Al-Nāṣir created a sophisticated spy-system to monitor his subjects.<sup>9</sup> As part of his surveillance program, the caliph monopolized the breeding of carrier-pigeons, and he banned the shooting of the birds with pellets. This ensured that only the caliph could intercept any correspondence.<sup>10</sup> As Erik Ohlander explains, al-Nāṣir endeavored to create

[a] unified Abode of Islam organized like the members of a Sufi ribaṭ, the students of the ḥalqa of a mudarris in a madrasa, or the apprentices of a master craftsmen in the trade markets, namely radially around a central figure, being linked to on another through their shared allegiance to a common master. In the case of al-Nasir, the center of this network was none other than the very ‘shadow of god upon earth,’ at one and the same time the Qurayshi Abbasid representative of the Prophet, the champion of the *ahl al-bayt*, the recognized master of the *futuwwa*, a master juris consult recognized by all four Sunni madhabs, and perhaps even a fully actualized Sufi, an individual whose very personhood was envisioned as a focal point of the collective soteriological ambitions of all those who could reasonably be circumscribed under its very comprehensiveness.<sup>11</sup>

It is worth pointing out that al-Nāṣir’s policies were not universally accepted; many traditionalist Sunni jurists, for example, accused him of being a closet Shiite.<sup>12</sup> And neither Al-Nāṣir nor his

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<sup>7</sup> Erik Ohlander, *Sufism in an Age of Transition: Umar al-Suhrawardi and the Rise of the Islamic Mystical Brotherhoods* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-6.

<sup>9</sup> Angelika Hartmann, *An-Nasir li-Din Allah: Politik, Religion und Kultur in der späten Abbasidenzeit* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1975); Julia Bray, “Introduction,” in *Consorts of the Caliphs: Women and the Court of Baghdad*, ed. Julia Bray (New York: New York University Press, 2015), xxi.

<sup>10</sup> In the pre-modern Islamic world, carrier-pigeons played a central role in the “gathering and transmission of intelligence, and it was used in Iraq since at least the Buyid period if not earlier.” While the notes that pigeons covered could not be terribly lengthy, they actually arrived at their destination faster than such more conventional methods of transportation as the *barīd*. Adam Silverstein, *Postal Systems in the Pre-Modern Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 176.

<sup>11</sup> Ohlander, *Sufism*, 253-254.

<sup>12</sup> See Hartmann, “Al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh.”

successors ever fully achieved his goals of uniting all political and religious authority in the person of the caliph. After al-Nāṣir's death, the caliphate slowly collapsed, and many came to blame his failures for the Mongol conquest in 1258.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, al-Nāṣir did succeed in reshaping the social and political life of the caliphate and in bringing Iraq's myriad independent social organizations more directly under his purview. His reforms have tended to be discussed only with regards to Iraq's Muslims. In the following sections, I consider the implications of al-Nāṣir's ideological reforms for Jewish government officials in particular and, by extension, the exercise of rabbinic authority during the final years of the Abbasid Caliphate.

#### Jewish and Christian Government Officials under al-Nāṣir

The most complete and representative chronicle depiction the years of al-Nāṣir's reign is that of Ibn al-Sā'ī (1197-1276) the librarian of Baghdad's most important law colleges, the Nizāmiyyah and the Muntaṣiriyya. Ibn al-Sā'ī was patronized by many high-level Abbasid officials, including Suhrawardī, who inducted him into a Sufi order at a young age. In all of his writings, he was an eager propagandist for the Abbasid caliphs of his day. Ibn al-Sā'ī's text itself is organized chronologically by year, according to the model of such previous annalistic chronicles composed by members of the *ulamā'* as *Kitāb al-Muntaẓam* of Ibn al-Jawzī: each year includes a list of events that took place followed by a list of short biographical notices of prominent officials who died in the same year. At the same time, Ibn al-Sā'ī wrote his chronicle after the Mongols defeated the last Abbasid caliph in Baghdad, effectively bringing to an end the five centuries of Abbasid and Islamic rule in Baghdad. Through their historical works, Ibn al-

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<sup>13</sup> Hanne, *Putting the Caliph in his Place*,

Sā'ī and his contemporaries sought to memorialize and extol what in essence was a lost world and defend its values during a time of rupture and uncertainty.<sup>14</sup>

Historians of the Late Abbasid Caliphate have devoted little attention to the study of non-Muslims. They describe elite courtly culture in this period as being characterized mainly by *ḥadīth* transmission among the *ulamā'* and the promulgation of Sufism within the *futuwwa*.<sup>15</sup> What did this mean for Jewish government officials? On the one hand, al-Nāṣir continued the policy of his predecessors with regards to Jewish and Christian government officials. He tolerated their employment while also, periodically, issuing edicts banning them from government offices, likely in response to pressure from the *'ulamā'*. On the other hand, contemporaneous chroniclers closely affiliated with al-Nāṣir's ideology characterized Jewish government officials in respectful terms, in marked contrast from the depictions of Jewish officials during the Seljuq period. These accounts suggest that Jewish officials, far from being fully marginalized in relation to the *'ulamā'*, took part in elite Arabic courtly culture, possibly to a greater degree than ever before, during the final years of the Abbasid Caliphate.

According to Ibn al-Sā'ī, in the year 601 (1204-1205), the caliph al-Nāṣir issued an edict ordering that “no one from among the *Ahl al-Dhimma* should be employed in the *dīwān*.”<sup>16</sup> He reports that all non-Muslim officials in the Diwan converted to Islam at this time, including a certain Christian named Abu Ghālib ibn Zaṭīnā, a scribe in the *Diwān al-‘Azīz*.<sup>17</sup> Abu Ghālib died in the same year as the edict, and Ibn al-Sā'ī eulogizes him as a “Muslim, an excellent scribe and officer.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Julia Bray, “Introduction,” in *Consorts of the Caliphs: Women and the Court of Baghdad*, ed. Julia Bray (New York: New York University Press, 2015), xxi.

<sup>15</sup> Hartmann, “al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*.

<sup>16</sup> Ibn al-Sā'ī, *al-Jami' al-Mukhtaṣar*, 161.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn al-Sā'ī, *al-Jami' al-Mukhtaṣar*, 161-162.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

In the same year, however, Ibn al-Sā'ī reports the deaths of three other Jewish officials: Abu Ṭāhir b. Shibr, *jahbadh* of the Diwan al-ʿAzīz who was “a chief of the Jews” (*rāʾis al-yahud*<sup>19</sup>); his son, Abū Ghālib b. Abi Ṭāhir b. Shibr, identified as “the Jew, an official of the mint,”<sup>20</sup> and a certain Abu Ghālib b. Kammūna, identified as a Jew, likely also a Jewish official with some relation to the mint.<sup>21</sup> The fact that Ibn al-Sā'ī continued to identify these officials as Jews, even in death (as opposed to Abu Ghālib ibn Zātīna who was eulogized as a Muslim) suggests that these Jewish officials did not, in fact, convert. Based on the chronicler's references to Jewish officials during later dates, it seems that the decree, like those promulgated during the Seljuq period, did not have the effect of permanently banning Jews or Christians from government offices.

Why did the chronicler report the (apparently natural) deaths of three Jewish officials during the same year as the caliph's decree banning them from the *dīwān*? It is certainly possible that the deaths of the three officials in the same year was just a coincidence. It is more likely that the chronicler included these accounts for ideological purposes. The narrative that Al-Nāṣir banned *dhimmī* government officials from the *diwan* and that they all converted served to glorify the late caliph as an ideal Islamic leader. It is possible, however, that Al-Nāṣir's decree was never really enforced, and that the Jewish government officials did not die in the same year as the decree, but continued to serve in Abbasid administration until their deaths at later dates. The chronicler might have chosen to report their deaths in this particular year so as to imply that Al-Nāṣir's administration really was free of *dhimmī* officials. It is also possible that the three

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<sup>19</sup> Likely not a reference to a formal position like the one under the Fatimids.

<sup>20</sup> Ibn al-Sā'ī, *al-Jamīʿ al-Mukhtaṣar*, 165-66.

<sup>21</sup> There is a reference to Ibn Kammūna in the messianic account from the Seljuq period discussed in Chapter 3. He is related to the famous philosopher Ibn Kammūna (c. 1284).

officials were killed for refusing to convert to Islam, and the chronicler omitted this detail in an effort to portray the decree as having been executed peacefully.

Still, in contrast to the overwhelmingly negative depictions of Jewish government officials in Seljuq-era chronicles, Ibn al-Sā'ī and his contemporaries portrayed Jewish government officials in positive terms. Consider Ibn al-Sā'ī's eulogy for the aforementioned Abu Tāhir b. Shibr, *jahbadh* of the Dīwān al-'Azīz. His inclusion alongside such scholars indicates both respect and prestige—the antithesis of the depiction of Jewish *jahbadhs* in Seljuq sources. Ibn al-Sā'ī informs us that he “died at the end of the month of Ramadan in the year 601/1204-1205. He was brought to the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem and buried there.”<sup>22</sup> This information about his burial was likely included to demonstrate the deceased official's wealth, prestige, and honor. Ibn al-Sā'ī did not provide any additional information about Abu Tāhir's son or his death.

His son's eulogy is followed in the chronicle by that of the Jewish official Abu Ghālib b. Kammūna: “Abu Ghālib b. Kammūna the Jew died in the same year in an underground prison/storeroom in Wāsiṭ. He had been counterfeiting the handwriting of Ibn Muqla.”<sup>23</sup> Here we have a eulogy of a Jewish official who died in prison, likely while being punished for committing fraud. Yet this eulogy is included in a list intended to record the deaths of individuals of note. So why was Ibn Kammūna included here? The answer likely has something to do with the nature of his “crime.” Ibn Muqla, who lived during the tenth century, is considered the father of Arabic calligraphy. There are many accounts of attempts to emulate Ibn Muqla's hand, since manuscripts written in his hand were very valuable. In this case, the official was eulogized for his beautiful handwriting—even though, or perhaps because, he used this skill to commit fraud.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibn al-Sā'ī, 162-163.

<sup>23</sup> Copies in the hand of Ibn Muqla were particularly valuable. Cf. the story in Johannes Pedersen, *The Arabic Book*, trans. Geoffrey French, ed. Robert Hillenbrand (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 87. Original Source: Yaqt, *Irshad*, Vol. VI, 22.



But in memorializing the world of the Abbasid court, Ibn al-Sā'ī, a librarian, chose to honor individuals with great skills in handwriting, regardless of their religious status.

Yet Muslim chroniclers of this period not only recorded eulogies for Jews who held traditional positions in the Abbasid bureaucracy, but also for two Jewish geonim, praising them for their skills in Arabic calligraphy, poetry, medicine, and philosophy:

Hibat Allah b. Abi al-Rabi' the *Dhimmī* who was head of the academy of the Jews. He was learned in medicine and in philosophy and he wrote in a beautiful hand. He died in Thai Al-Hija of 606/1210 and he reached the age of 60.<sup>24</sup>

Another anonymous chronicler eulogized the gaon Ibn al-Shuwayikh in equally laudatory terms:

In that year [645] Abu al-Fatah Ishāq b. al-Shuwayikh, head of the academy of the Jews (ra'is al-mathiba al-yahud) passed away. He was generous and cultured. He wrote in a beautiful hand and composed good poems. He was an expert in astronomy. He wrote to Tāj al-Dīn, the *ṣadr al-makhzan*, with a request: would the makhzan issue a petition to some of the Jews from Ḥarba [a town in central Iraq, near Baghdad]. And the official responded: 'The request of his petition is granted.'<sup>25</sup>

But as Ibn al-Sā'ī explained, Tāj al-Dīn granted the petition in a grammatically incorrect manner. He wrote a *dhamma*, a vowel written above a letter to indicate the nominative case, instead of a *kasra*, a vowel written below a letter indicating the genitive case. In response, Ibn al-Shuwayikh addressed the following lines of poetry to Tāj al-Dīn:

Your endeavor was always to support those in need  
To bandage the broken and lift up the fallen  
In doing this, your pen on the paper simply took up your course  
So it is hardly surprising that it raised up the low.<sup>26</sup>

The phrase “raising up the low” equates to Tāj al-Dīn's generosity in granting the petition to the Jews of Ḥarba with his grammatical mistake—raising the *kasra* above the letter and writing a

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<sup>24</sup> Ibn al-Sā'ī, 283.

<sup>25</sup> This chronicle was attributed to Ibn al-Fuwattī but now manuscript evidence has refuted this. But it would be one of his contemporaries.

<sup>26</sup> Ibn al-Fuwattī, *al-Hawadith*, 112. Trans. Joseph Yahalom, “Andalusian Poetics and the Work of Elazar ben Ya'aqov of Baghdad,” *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 4 (2004), 7, and it is clearly based on a different edition of the text.

*dhamma*. The chronicler, however, does not depict this incident as one of a haughty Jewish official acting superior to a Muslim. Instead, he characterizes Ibn al-Shuwayikh in overwhelmingly positive terms.

These laudatory biographies of Jewish government officials and their inclusion alongside eulogies of Muslim scholars and court officials suggests that the employment of Jewish government officials did not represent the same problem or challenge to the *'ulamā'* during the late twelfth and early thirteenth century as it had during the Seljuq period. In Seljuq Baghdad, in particular, the *'ulamā'* advanced this discourse to exploit the competition for power and authority between the Seljuq sultans and the Abbasid caliph. Ibn al-Sā'ī, however, was part of the most elite courtly circles and patronized by Abbasid elites. In this regard, he himself was not competing against Jewish and Christian officials for patronage or prestige. Moreover, al-Nāṣir's reforms and those of his predecessors actually had the effect of increasing the number of positions patronized by the caliph. Jewish and Christian government officials did not constitute the same threat to the patronage of the *'ulamā'* as they had during the Seljuq period. This could explain why, in contrast to the overwhelmingly negative depictions of Jewish officials from the Seljuq period, Ibn al-Sā'ī and his contemporaries eulogized Jewish officials in respectful terms, alongside Muslim elites.

The chroniclers' inclusion of biographical notices about the geonim suggests that they did not confine themselves to the world of the yeshivot during this period. Rather, the geonim took part in elite Arabic courtly culture—to such an extent that they developed favorable reputations in these fields outside of the Jewish community. Sometimes, they even engaged in witty grammatical and poetic banter with high-ranked Muslim government officials.

Whereas chronicles from earlier periods referred to Jewish exilarchs and such other Jewish government officials as *jahbadhs*, they never mentioned geonim. The integration of the geonim into Abbasid courtly circles in this period should be understood, in part, as a consequence of the granting of caliphal investiture to the geonim. As the next section argues, that significant change in the political status of the geonim dates to the second half of the twelfth century.

When did the Babylonian Geonim first receive investiture from the Abbasid Caliph?

A document copied by Ibn al-Sā'ī constitutes the earliest documented evidence attesting to the Babylonian geonim having received investiture from the Abbasid caliph. According to the document, Daniyāl was not the first individual to hold the office of *Ra'is al-Mathība*. Instead, it specifies that “he shall be appointed Rais Mathība after the fashion of the abovementioned deceased [Al-Azar b. Hilāl b. Fahd], in so far as Ibn al-Dastūr [Shemu'el b. 'Eli] was likewise *Ra'is al-Mathība*.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, the first documented evidence of a gaon having received investiture from an Abbasid caliph is Shemu'el b. 'Eli (gaon from 1164-1194 or 1197). The surviving portion of the chronicle begins in 595 H/1198 CE, so we do not have the document of investiture for Shemu'el b. Eli or Hibat-allāh. Nevertheless, Arabic chroniclers recorded documents of investiture for subsequent geonim during the thirteenth century.

Some insight into this change comes from comparing the accounts of two travelers to Baghdad during the gaonate of Shemu'el b. 'Eli. Benjamin of Tudela, a Jew from Christian Navarre, who traveled throughout the known Jewish world before 1173 and while the exilarch Daniel b. Hisday was still alive. Petahya of Regensburg (Ratsibon), a Jew from Ashkenaz,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibn Al-Sā'ī, 267. Translation: Fischel, *Jews in the Economic and Political Life*, 128.

traveled to Baghdad before 1175, but after Daniel b. Ḥisday's death. Both writers, in contrast to accounts from the Buyid and Seljuq periods, depict the Abbasid caliph as an ally of Baghdad's Jewish leadership. They differ in their precise description of the structure and hierarchy of that leadership.

Benjamin, the earlier of the two accounts, depicts the head of the yeshiva, Daniel b. Ḥisday, as the unquestionable head of the Jewish community who held investiture from the Abbasid caliph:

And at the head of all of [the Jews] is Daniel the son of Hisday who is styled "our lord the head of the captivity of all Israel. He possesses a book of pedigrees going back as far as David, King of Israel. The Jews call him our lord, the head of the captivity," and the Muslims call him "Saidna ben Daud", and he has been invested with authority over all the congregations of Israel at the hands of the Amir al-Muminin, the Lord of Islam...At his installation, the head of the captivity gives much money to the caliph, to the princes and the ministers. On the day that the caliph performs the ceremony of investing him with authority, he rides in the second of the royal equipages and is escorted from the palace of the caliph to his own house with timbrels and fifes. The exilarch appoints the chiefs of the academies by placing his hand upon their heads thus installing them in their office.<sup>28</sup>

Benjamin is unequivocal that the exilarch is the highest ranked Jewish official and that he invests the heads of the yeshiva with authority.

Petaḥya confirms that, during his lifetime, Daniel, as Rosh Golah, was the supreme Jewish authority in Baghdad:

A year before the arrival of R. Petaḥya, Rabbi Daniel Rosh Golah died. He is a higher authority than the head of the academy. They all possess a book of genealogy, up to the founders of the tribes; Rabbi Daniel descended from the house of David.

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<sup>28</sup> Benajmin, *Travels*, 100-1.

Yet Petahya, writing one year after the death of Daniel b. Hasday, reports that the community could not agree on the selection of a new exilarch, and that the caliph did not require them to do so:

The monarch does not appoint a head of the captivity, save at the recommendation of the princes among the Jews. There is no one there eligible to be rosh golah except for the two princes of the house of David, and some of the princes prefer Rabbi David and some Rabbi Shemu'el. They have not yet come to an understanding. They are both of the disciples of the wise. Rabbi Daniel had no sons, only daughters.<sup>29</sup>

According to Petahya, after Daniel b. Hisday's death, Shemu'el b. Eli, the Rosh Yeshiva, who conducted himself "like the king," or caliph who took up leadership of the Jewish community:

Every Jew in Bavel gives one gold coin to the Head of the Academy every year as a poll tax, for the king does not demand anything from them except for the Head of the Academy. There is peace for the Jews in the land of Bavel.<sup>30</sup> ... The head of the academy has many servants. They flog any one not immediately carrying out his orders; therefore people fear him. He, however is righteous, humble, and full of knowledge of the law. He is clothed in golden and colored garments like the king; his palace [*paltin*]<sup>31</sup> also is hung with costly tapestry like that of the king.<sup>32</sup>

The use of the Hebrew term *paltin* to refer to the gaon's "palace" further underscores the political dimension of Shemu'el's position.

These two accounts, coupled with the lack of evidence for geonic investiture in previous periods, suggests that the exilarch (theoretically) was the only Jewish leader with caliphal investiture in Iraq until the death of Daniel b. Hisday. Taking advantage of the conflict over his successor, Shemu'el b. Eli began to assert certain exilarchic prerogatives for himself: he wore ornamented clothing, collected the poll tax, and enforced his rulings using physical force.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Petahya, Sibbuv, 18-9.

<sup>30</sup> Petahya, Sibbuv, 19-21.

<sup>31</sup> The term refers to an official of a European monarch.

<sup>32</sup> Petahya, Sibbuv, 41-3.

<sup>33</sup> Petahya, Sibbuv, 41-3.

Around this time, he likely petitioned the caliph to invest his office of *Ra'is al-Mathība* with direct political authority.

Although the geonim separated themselves from politics at least on a rhetorical level, they had always cultivated close relations with Jewish officials at the Abbasid court. They depended on the power of the state to enforce their rule over the communities under their jurisdiction. Indeed, a similar situation had existed in Egypt, where the Palestinian gaon had received investiture from the Fatimid caliph since the middle of the tenth century.<sup>34</sup> In this regard, Shemu'el's success in securing caliphal investiture for the office of gaon can be seen as a continuation of earlier trends of an increasing alignment between the Babylonian geonim and the Abbasid State.

I argue though that it is not a coincidence that the geonim in Baghdad first received investiture from the Abbasid caliph either right before or during the reign of the caliph al-Nāṣir. Many of Al-Nāṣir's reforms (and those of his predecessors) endeavored to centralize the administration of the caliphate and bring such extra-state organizations as the *futuwwa* and the *madrasas* more directly under the purview of the caliph. By granting investiture to the gaon, the caliph ensured that Jewish organizations external to the state would also come more directly under his rule.

Previously, the Jewish yeshivot did not have a direct relationship with the Abbasid state. The geonim administered certain territories and Jewish communities and did appoint judges over them; but these privileges had been granted through the exilarch or, more often since the exilarchs and geonim were often in conflict, through the intercession of other Jewish officials at court. The granting of investiture to the gaon did not preclude the granting of investiture to the

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<sup>34</sup> Mark R. Cohen, *Jewish Self-Government in Medieval Egypt: The Origins of the Office of the Head of the Jews, ca. 1065-1126* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

exilarch, nor did it prohibit other Jews from serving in government posts. Nevertheless, by granting investiture to the gaon, the caliph was able to more directly administer the Jews under his rule.

Moreover, as Ohlander explains, a great deal of Al-Nāṣir's ideological reforms endeavored to organize all of Abbasid society radially around himself, with his subjects all linked to each other through their shared allegiance to the person of the caliph.<sup>35</sup> In this regard, the circle of disciples (*ḥalqa*) of a master teacher (*mudarris*) served as a synecdoche for the caliphate as a whole, as students became linked to each other and to their master, with the caliph positioning himself as the chief *mudarris*. The yeshiva itself functioned in a similar fashion as the *madrassa*. Both institutions promoted themselves as transmitters of oral tradition and religious law. In both the *madrassa* and the yeshiva, students sat in rows encircling the *mudarris* or gaon and were linked together through their own loyalty to his person and shared ideological and religious project. As the caliph brought the institution of the *madrassa* more directly under his control, he also incorporated the yeshiva/*mathība*—the Jewish madrasa—into the purview of Abbasid administration.

This would also explain why contemporaneous chroniclers included biographical notices about the geonim; by this period, they were, in fact, part of Abbasid administration. They submitted petitions on behalf of groups of Jews before the caliph's representatives. In their capacity as Abbasid administrators, they, like their Muslim counterparts, took part in aspects of Abbasid courtly culture, developing reputations in fields as varied as medicine, philosophy, Arabic calligraphy, and poetry. In sum, there was a shift in the status of Jewish officials at the Abbasid court during the second half of the twelfth century. The status of Jewish officials

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<sup>35</sup> Ohlander, *Sufism*.

increased, and the Babylonian gaon received investiture for the first time. Part II considers what this increasing alignment between the yeshivot and the state meant for Jewish communal administration during this period.

## **Part II: Impact on the Exercise of Geonic Authority**

The closer alignment between the Abbasid State and Babylonian Jewish leadership during this period would have an outsized impact on the Jewish community and the ways in which the geonim and their allies came to promote their authority among Jews. In particular, the granting of state investiture to the geonim meant that the geonim no longer had to rely on Jewish court bankers or the exilarch to harness the power of the state to enforce their rule. This section begins with an overview of the surviving documentary evidence related to the rabbinic Jewish community of Iraq during this period. Then, I analyze this correspondence for evidence of how Jewish leaders used the power of the Abbasid state to advance their own rule over the communities under their jurisdiction. Finally, I consider how this new political arrangement affected the kinds of claims to authority that the geonim and the exilarch made against each other during this period.

### Documentary Evidence for the *Reshuyot* of Iraq

Two collections of copies of letters (Yevr II A 72 and Yevr II A 105) written by geonim of Baghdad and their contemporaries in the second half of the twelfth century and early thirteenth century, first published and analyzed by Simḥa Assaf, offer insight into how geonic authority functioned on a practical level.<sup>36</sup> The logic by which these letters were collected is

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<sup>36</sup> Simḥa Assaf, “Letters of R. Samuel ben Eli and his Contemporaries,” *Tarbitz*. Part I: 1.1 *Tarbiṣ* (1929), 102-30; Part II: *Tarbitz* 1.2 (1930), 43-84; Part III: *Tarbiṣ* 1.3 (1930), 15-80 [Heb.]. The manuscript images are not available on FGP.



somewhat unclear; they are not all written in chronological order, and they certainly do not represent the entire written output or correspondence of Baghdad's Jewish communal authorities.

In addition, around eight manuscript fragments written in the hand of Shemu 'el b. 'Eli (or one of his scribes) were preserved in the Cairo Geniza. Although most were not preserved in their entirety, the letters are significant for their physical features: Shemu 'el b. Eli wrote in an elaborate hand, occasionally using Arabic vowel signs on top of Hebrew letters. He employed wide spaces between lines, as well as a large right margin and stacked lines. In addition, he began his letters with a *tarjama*, echoing Arabic scribal practice. In doing so, Shemu 'el continued the scribal conventions employed by his predecessors in the gaonate over a century before him. Moreover, the majority of the letters are elaborate and ornamental; they use copious amounts of paper and are quite beautiful. They are the work of a wealthy, prestigious institution.

The letters make reference to some thirty Jewish communities throughout Iraq, Iran, Mesopotamia, and Greater Syria. The vast majority of the letters indicate that these communities either paid tribute (or the gaon hoped to get them to pay tribute) to the yeshiva or the yeshiva's representative in a given region. The communities in northern Iraq, for example, were administered by a judge, while many of those in Syria seem to have been under the control of the head of the yeshiva of Damascus, who himself held a title from the yeshiva in Baghdad.

Whereas the documentary evidence from the earlier geonic period points to trans-regional relations between the yeshivot and distant communities under Fatimid control, the surviving texts from the late-twelfth and early-thirteenth centuries give more insight into relations between different communities and individuals within Iraq itself. Because there is almost no documentary evidence pointing to intra-Iraqi Jewish relations before this period, it is difficult to say with

complete certainty whether the letters point to a continuity in the operations of the Babylonian yeshivot or new developments in Jewish communal administration under the later Abbasids.

#### “By the hand of the government”: Geonic Administration in the Late Abbasid Period

The geonim relied on the state to enforce their legal rulings and contracts and assumed that their requests would be honored, provided they wrote documents according to Islamic law. In a letter from 1166 found in the Cairo Geniza, Shemu’el b. ‘Eli gave a ruling on how to divide up an inheritance between an orphan girl and a certain Yosef and his wife. After explaining the division of the estate, Shemu’el stipulated that the judge should record the agreement in writing:

And he should write this for him in a legal document (*sheṭar*) according to religious law (*kānūn shar’ aī*)<sup>37</sup> and whoever opposes this edict from the opposing parties, it will incumbent on him to be required by it, by religious law and by the hand of the government (*sulṭaniya*).<sup>38</sup>

In composing the document in this matter, the judge ensures that should one of the parties not abide by the agreement, the other party could appeal to the government in order to enforce it.

The geonim also relied on government officials to prevent Jews under their *reshut* (jurisdiction) from using other legal venues. In other words, the state enforced the “autonomy” of the yeshiva’s rule. In a letter from 1185, Shemu’el b. ‘Eli also warned an unnamed community against *rakilot*, or gossip. The implication is that such “gossip” refers to individuals leaving their own *reshut* and possibly appealing to the government:

Our compatriots, to you from the people of obedience and those who obey the decrees of religion and law. It has come to our attention about a dispute of their plan that divided their hearts. And some of them pursued others with damage and gossip and this is one of the most severe crimes that leads to ruin and uproots houses and obliterates tradition, angering the creator, may he be exalted, and procures his punishment. Thus beware of them and beware of them in becoming accustomed to

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<sup>37</sup> The phrase could refer to Islamic (Sharia) law, since the gaon is directing the official to compose a document so that it can be enforced by the hand of the government. On the other hand, this phrase is often used in Judeo-Arabic to refer to Halakhah.

<sup>38</sup> T-S13J9.7; Gil, *In the Land of Ishmael*, doc. 75.

acting like this, and fear god and his punishment, and seek peace that if its aim is obtained it will be as it is written, “the lord will establish peace for us.”<sup>39</sup>

At first, it might appear that the gaon is warning against the practice of informing on other Jews to the government. But then, he continues by warning the community that the yeshiva has appointed a deputy and a prince (likely a representative of the government) to ensure that any Jew trying to escape the bounds of his own *reshut* would be returned and subject to physical punishment:

We have directed our deputy Mar Rav Ya‘aqov the *Dayyan*, the wise honored one ... to inform us about everyone who sanctions gossip. Moreover, we have advanced a government official (*sar*) to afflict [the gossip] quickly and inform us...and our compatriots [so] that anyone who does this will be returned to us from their *reshut*... but now it is necessary for them, may god protect them, to redress this in this year and to pay the *reshut* to our representative in its entirety from every person.<sup>40</sup>

In this letter, Shemu’el also demonstrates that the Jewish authorities relied on the state to suppress individuals disloyal to them and protect the boundaries of their *reshut*. The gaon writes, “[w]e have advanced a prince to afflict [the gossip]” suggesting that he has authority over Jewish government officials and the ability to deploy individuals to regions all over Iraq to enforce his rule.

Overall, the letters evoke a climate in which the centralized Jewish authorities were able to keep a close eye on the communities and individuals under their jurisdiction. Whenever a community was unfaithful—whether they did not send the requisite dues to the yeshiva or tried to use a legal venue outside of the yeshiva’s authority—the gaon wrote to say that he has sent a “deputy” or a “prince” to ensure the community or individual’s obedience to the yeshiva and report back to the yeshiva about any future disobedience. The yeshiva’s administration relied on

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<sup>39</sup> Assaf II, 56-7.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

the faithfulness of the officials it appointed to collect dues from the various communities under its jurisdiction. As Shemu'el wrote of his protégé and representative Zekharya b. Berakhel in his letter investing him with authority over the Lands of Syria: “whoever is close to him is close to us, and whoever is far from him is far from us.”<sup>41</sup>

But what happened if one of these officials was disloyal to the yeshiva or neglected his duties? As the following letter demonstrates, the gaon could appoint yet another official to supervise the disloyal official. An anonymous gaon composed a letter to “the exalted Head Thiqat al-Mulk (“Faithful one of the realm”).” The title *ra'is*, coupled with the *laqab* Thiqat al-Mulk, suggests that the recipient of the letter may himself have held a government appointment. After relatively brief introductory blessings and greetings, the gaon writes:

You defaulted on us and did not appear in our council (*majlis*). And god knows how we grieved at his absence, his tardiness, his distance [from us]. If he, with his good fortune, chose to neglect us and our eternal correspondence ...but we do not want to treat him as if he did that. Rather, we held our connection with him in high esteem and we chose to write to him, in order that he be overcome in his soul by its ancient love and great support.<sup>42</sup>

Here, the gaon rebukes an official who failed to appear in his presence to deliver the funds that he (or his community) owed to the yeshiva. The gaon chooses to treat the official as if he were merely delayed and had not actually chosen to betray the yeshiva. It is unclear what, exactly, would happen if the gaon treated the official as if he had defaulted on purpose. Likely, he would have turned him over to the state for punishment. The letter suggests that the gaon is able to threaten a Jewish courtier with the use of state power—even though the individual in question has a title granted to him from the state. But then, the gaon continues:

We have appointed a deputy to write to us about him, witnessing him, scrutinizing him, and observing him. While we inquire about him, we have persisted with blessings and we present him with prayers for reconciliation. And god is very

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<sup>41</sup> Assaf, “Letters,” II, 69.

<sup>42</sup> Assaf, “Letters,” II, 45.

exalted and his glory rises for all eternity. It is necessary to separate noble high-mindedness from all that is facile and to execute the deeds of the *Beit Din* and that they are carried out by the hand of a faithful one. The obligation on him challenges him, and the eye follows him, directing him to account for the loads that are not complete and the provisions (important matters) that are not hidden from his presence and avoid negligence. In this, may god grant him success and bear witness to his integrity.<sup>43</sup>

While the gaon might be giving Thiqat al-Mulk the benefit of the doubt here, he also takes no chances. Instead, the gaon has appointed a deputy to supervise him. In this regard, the reference to the “eye that follows him” here serves a double purpose. On the one hand, it refers to God, who is watching over Thiqat al-Mulk to ensure that he fulfills his religious duty. On the other hand, it refers to the deputy watching over Thiqat al-Mulk wherever he goes to ensure that he ultimately follows through on his obligation to the yeshiva.

These references to the yeshiva’s “eyes” in distant communities echo the accounts of the effective spy-system that Al-Nāṣir implemented in Iraq during this period. All of these examples point to the relative ease with which the gaon could rely on state power to advance his rule over the communities in his jurisdiction, a consequence of the caliphal investiture that the geonim came to enjoy during this period.

Nevertheless, the gaon was not the only Jewish authority with caliphal investiture operating in Iraq. He also had to contend with the exilarch, who continued to carry out his traditional prerogatives and administer lands under his jurisdiction. This led the two offices into even greater conflict with each other than ever before. The following section considers what this meant for the claims to authority made by the yeshiva during the final years of the caliphate.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 45-46.

## Geonic Claims to Authority against the Exilarch

The traditional prerogative of the exilarch, dating back to Talmudic times, was as a representative of Jews before the gentile authorities. The rabbis of the Talmud used their own rhetorical separation from state power, indeed, their powerlessness, to promote the spiritual and religious authority of the yeshivot, in contrast to what they characterized as the corruption inherent in the exilarch's position. The geonim, who positioned themselves as the spiritual heirs of the rabbis of the Talmud, continued to employ this rhetoric.

Nevertheless, during the tenth and eleventh centuries, even when the geonim found themselves in political conflict with the exilarch, they did not endeavor to eliminate his position altogether. Instead, they appealed to Jewish officials at the Abbasid court to petition the government to appoint an exilarch loyal to them. Consider the conflict between Sa'adya Gaon and David b. Zakkay during the tenth century: Sa'adya did not try to assume the exilarch's prerogatives for himself; rather, he used his alliance with the Jewish court banker Sahl b. Neṭira to appoint the current exilarch's brother as a counter-exilarch. Sa'adya's decision speaks to the importance of Davidic genealogy in constructions of Jewish communal authority in the early tenth century. At the same time, it suggests that the exilarch's function was somehow distinct from that of the gaon—and necessary. It was his role at the Abbasid court that made his position invaluable to Jewish communal rule and inherently distinct from that of the gaon.

By contrast, once the gaon received caliphal investiture as well, the political distinction between the two positions ceased to exist. As a result, during the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, the gaon and the exilarch competed for the loyalty of Jewish communities in Northern Iraq and Syria, and each figure tried to promote himself as the sole leader of world Jewry and discredit the other. In promoting his own authority as gaon and opposing the exilarch, the gaon

Shemu'el b. Eli marginalized the very concept of Jewish kingship while combining previously separate forms of Jewish communal authority in his own person.

#### Gaon as Genealogical and Scholarly Authority

The relationship between the yeshiva and the communities under its jurisdiction was an eternal covenant binding on all parties involved for generations. This covenant was renewed every year when the representatives of the communities appeared at the yeshiva and presented the requisite dues to the gaon. In letters rebuking communities who did not send donations at the requisite time, the geonim invoked the eternal nature of this covenant and asserted that it remained binding on current and future generations. But what, exactly, was this eternal covenant based upon? And from what, precisely, did the authority of the yeshiva derive? The answers to those questions were never entirely consistent. And during the late twelfth century, Jewish leaders invoked new claims to authority that were different from those that they had used a century earlier.

In a letter to 'Arbil before Rosh Hashana in Tishrei of 1193, Shemu'el invoked his own Levitical descent as constituting the foundation of the yeshiva's authority. In this formulation, God chose the Tribe of Levi to teach law and Torah to the Jewish people, and it is incumbent on the rest of the Jewish people to obey the Tribe of Levi, now represented by the yeshiva:

Malachai, peace be upon him, said in his book, "I have sanctified his names, glorifying the tribe of Levi, extolling it as he one who was singled out by the covenant joining life and peace, according to the prophet the messenger, peace be upon him. ... And everything related to this was elucidated by Moses our Teacher, peace be upon him, in his blessing to the tribes before his death. And that [to Levi] is as follows: "For they have observed your words and kept your covenant. They will teach Jacob your ordinances and Israel your law." [Deut 33:9-10]. And he continued after this to pray for him and against his enemies, as it is written "Bless lord his substance and accept the work of his hands; smite through the loins of them that rise up against him, and of them that hate him, that they not rise again." And it is appropriate that this holy tribe, that they should be guided by him in matters

concerning Halakhic commandments and the divine obligations as God, may he be exalted, distinguished [Levi] in this, to the exclusion of the rest of the people. And it is incumbent on the rest of them to [obey Levi], by Halakha and moreover in addition to the aforementioned divine command, the covenant and oath established definitively by him is the covenant that we made with our compatriots and dears—may god preserve their strength—more than thirty years ago, and the oaths that we made with them. We demand now especially their written correspondence with us about it, concerning the obligatory reverence for our tribe in general. And we inform them that this is necessary for them for a long period of time. One is not permitted to abandon it. For every covenant or oath renewed after that does not abrogate the covenant and the oath that came before them. Rather the preceding [oath] is the oath of expression, obligated by Halakhah.<sup>44</sup>

In essence, the covenant between the yeshiva and the community of 'Arbil, though technically instantiated thirty years earlier, was actually the covenant between God and the Tribe of Levi because of Shemu'el b. Eli's status as a Levite. Arnold Franklin suggests that "Shemu'el's appeal to genealogy was tailored in response to the exilarch's own self-legitimizing arguments, a reaction in kind to the rhetoric of ancestral entitlement advanced by the royal line."<sup>45</sup> But Franklin does not question why, specifically at this time, the gaon put so much emphasis on genealogy and the idea of priestly descent. After all, genealogy had played a central role in the legitimation of the Davidic line since before the tenth century, and the majority, although not all, of the geonim from previous years were from priestly families. Nevertheless, these earlier geonim did not imply that their Levitical or Kohenic descent was the basis of the authority of the yeshiva.<sup>46</sup>

This rather unprecedented argument for the authority of the yeshiva should be understood in relation to the political ideology of the Abbasid Caliphate in the late-twelfth and early-thirteenth centuries, which endeavored to combine the previously separate realms of political

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<sup>44</sup> Assaf, "Letters," III, 29-31.

<sup>45</sup> Franklin, *This Noble House*, 129.

<sup>46</sup> On the idea of Torah scholarship as replacing the function of the priests, see Stuart A. Cohen, *The Three Crowns: Structures of Communal Politics in Early Rabbinic Jewry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).



power (sovereignty), religious authority (as the main transmitter of *hadith*), and genealogical authority (as *qurayshi ahl-al-bayt*) in the person of the caliph. During this period of consolidation and centralization, Jews too advanced arguments combining previously separate forms of authority—religious authority as the guardian of the Oral Tradition and priestly/genealogical authority—into the person of the gaon. The fact that the gaon now also held caliphal investiture meant that religious authority, priestly/genealogical authority, and political authority were all now combined in his person.

Yet even though the gaon now held political authority in a more official manner than he had previously, he never claimed to possess Davidic ancestry (as Sherira Gaon had) or be entitled to exercise the prerogatives of Jewish kingship. Instead, the gaon asserted that the authority of the scholars and the yeshiva automatically outranked other forms of Jewish communal authority. In his 1186 letter to Kirkānī, a city in northern Iraq, the gaon drew on the Mishnaic concept of the “three crowns” of Jewish communal authority: the crown of Torah, represented by the rabbis (i.e., the yeshiva); the crown of priesthood, represented by those of Levitical descent; and the crown of sovereignty, represented by the Davidic line (i.e., the exilarch). In this letter written in Judeo-Arabic, the gaon uses an Aramaic passage from the Talmud to demonstrate that the yeshiva outranks all other forms of Jewish authority:

The covenant with us is incumbent upon our brothers—blessings upon them—and to their descendants until the end of all of the generations.” But if we did not have a covenant with them, it would still be incumbent on them to be obedient to the throne of the Torah and the obligation of the Yeshiva, since the rank of the Torah is greater than the rank of the High Priest (*Kohen Gadol*) and even greater than the Sovereignty (*Malukha*). Just as within the nation four crowns that landed from heaven alternate. The first of them is the Crown of Torah. As the sages, may their memory be a blessing, said: There were three crowns. And they are: the crown of the Ark, the crown of the Altar, and the crown of the Table. [Yoma 27b] The ark is equal to the sages of Israel since it contains within it the tablets of the covenant and the Sefer Torah. And the Altar is equivalent to the kohanim and the table is

equivalent to the kings of Israel. And it is known that the ark's rank is higher than the rest.<sup>47</sup>

In this formulation, the yeshiva, as the crown of Torah, outranks the exilarch, the crown of sovereignty, and thus should monopolize the community's loyalty.

Five years later, Shemu'el went even further, claiming not only that the Crown of Torah took precedence over the Crown of Sovereignty/Kingship, but also that the very concept of Jewish kingship was obsolete in the Diaspora. In a letter from 1191 to all of the Jewish communities in northern Iraq and Syria (specifically, the communities in Raqqa, Qal'āh, Sarūj, Manbaj, al-Bīrah, Bizā'ah, al-Bāb, Tadmar, Ḥamāh, Ḥamaṣ, B'albak, al-Rahā, and Ḥarān) and all of the land of Syria, he wrote:

Know that when Israel asked for a king in the time of Shemu'el, you are aware of how angry [God] became, saying, "They have not rejected you, rather they have rejected me from ruling over them" (I Shemu'el 8:7). And they chose a king only on account of the need for someone to lead them in battle...But in the times of exile they do not have a king or war, nor do they have any of the concerns that require a king. Rather, they have need only for one who can guide them, impart to them their religious obligations, judge their cases and decide for them matters of religious law.<sup>48</sup>

Shemu'el argues that such a kinglike figure as the exilarch serves no function for a Jewish community in exile. Rather, the community only requires a halakhic guide and arbiter: the gaon himself. In this way, Shemu'el promotes himself as the sole legitimate leader of the Jewish people.

### The Exilarch's Response

To refute these challenges, the exilarch argued that the Babylonian geonim held no intrinsic halakhic authority. In doing so, he enlisted the help of Musa b. Maymūn (Maimonides),

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<sup>47</sup> Assaf, "Letters," II, 51.

<sup>48</sup> Assaf, I, 65-67; Franklin, *This Noble House*, trans. 127.

who had been named Head of the Jews in Egypt in 1171, and his student, Yosef b. ‘Aqnīn. As Sarah Stroumsa argues, Maimonides was influenced by the Almohad legal methodology he was exposed to in his native Al-Andalus, particularly the writings of Ibn Tūmart. He set out to compose a brief yet comprehensive code of Jewish law along the model of contemporaneous Almohad law codes; his work privileges the primary sources (*uṣūl*) of legislation over the rulings of later commentators and avoids mentioning the names of transmitters, arguments in support of each ruling, and alternative rulings.<sup>49</sup>

Ultimately, Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*, completed in 1178 in Egypt, sought to replace the kind of Talmudic study that predominated at the Babylonian yeshivot. Throughout his introduction, Maimonides bemoaned what he characterized as the poor state of rabbinic learning in his own day:

And now the calamities are many and frequent, and the harsh times destroyed everything. The wisdom of our sages has been lost, and the intelligence of our scholars has been hidden. Therefore, those explanations, responses, and laws written by the geonim have become hard to decipher, and there are only few who can fully comprehend their contents. Needless to say, fewer comprehend the Talmud itself.<sup>50</sup>

Instead, Maimonides asserted that the circumstances of his own day required a clear, lucid, and comprehensive guide to the commandments, the *Mishneh Torah*, itself:

Because of all of that I, Moshe son of Rabbi Maimon of Sefarad, have decided to take action. I have relied on the creator and analyzed all these writings....All will be written in lucid language and few words, so that all people will be well-versed in the totality of the Oral law, with no questions and answers, with no “this one says so and that one says so” but rather clear, accessible, correct concepts, following the law distilled from all the books and commentaries created from the time of Rabbi Judah the Holy until today.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Sarah Stroumsa, *Maimonides in his World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 59-70. *Sefer Ha-Miṣvot*, 1-2.

<sup>50</sup> Maimonides, Introduction to the *Mishneh Torah*.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

As Maimonides explained, the Mishneh Torah was meant to replace the study of such other halakhic commentaries as those composed by the Babylonian geonim:

Thus, I have called this work the Restatement of the Law [Mishneh Torah], for a person reads the Written Law first and then reads this work, and knows from it the entire Oral Law, without needing to read any other book between them.<sup>52</sup>

The Mishneh Torah, therefore, purported to make the Babylonian yeshivot obsolete. By contrast, Maimonides spoke in glowing terms of the authority of the Babylonian exilarchs, asserting that his office commanded authority over Jews worldwide and that he, alone, had the ability to appoint judges.<sup>53</sup>

With the goal of countering the Babylonian gaon's claims to halakhic supremacy while advancing the authority of his own office, the exilarch invited Yosef b. Yehudah b. 'Aknin to open a school in Baghdad to teach the *Mishneh Torah*. In a letter from 1191, Maimonides praised Yosef for his service to the exilarch in Baghdad, writing, "were it not for you the exilarch would have been in [Shemu'el b. 'Eli's] hands like a chick in the talons of a hawk...and would have torn him to shreds."<sup>54</sup>

It is worth noting that previous Babylonian exilarchs had accepted the Babylonian geonic claims to halakhic supremacy. As discussed in Chapter 3, the exilarch Yehezqihu had even taken over one of the yeshivot in Baghdad in the middle of the eleventh century and assumed the prerogatives of the Babylonian gaon for himself. The exilarch's promotion of a text that denied Babylonian primacy in halakhic matters is further evidence of the unprecedented political challenge that the investiture of the Babylonian gaon represented to his office during this period.

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<sup>52</sup> Mishneh Torah, paragraphs 40-42.

<sup>53</sup> Mishneh Torah, Sanhedrin 4:13-14.

<sup>54</sup> Maimonides, "Letter to Ibn Akin." Translation: Kraemer, *Maimonides*, 417.

Nevertheless, it would appear that neither official succeeded in monopolizing the loyalties of Iraq's Jews. Two Judeo-Arabic letters on the same piece of paper composed by the gaon Daniel b. El'azar He-Ḥasid regarding the administration of the Synagogue of Ezra the Scribe in Central Iraq survived in the geniza and give insight into the . In the first letter, dated 1197, Daniel b. El'azar appoints or confirms a certain Abu al-Ḥasan as the caretaker (*khādim*) of the synagogue and stipulates that his son, Abu Maṣṣūr will succeed him after his death. The second letter, from 1201, directs the community of Wasit and Basra to confirm Abu Maṣṣūr's appointment:

How exalted is he in religion and trustworthiness and faith and in his efforts in the service of the Synagogue of our Lord Ezra, the holy place! And there is no one who can take his place. And he has in his hand a letter from our Lord our Rabbi our Gaon Shemu'el Ha-Levi Rosh Yeshiva shel Golah [b. 'Eli] and a letter from our Prince David *Rosh Galuyot* of all Israel.<sup>55</sup>

In order to succeed his father at the post and gain the support of the community of Jews who made pilgrimages to the synagogue, Abu Maṣṣūr had obtained letters of support from both the gaon and the exilarch, even though (or because) they were rivals. This suggests that, despite the polemics previously discussed, many Jews continued to defer to multiple competing authorities.

### **Part III: “He goes out in the splendor of the kingdom”**

Even though he praised Yosef for assisting the exilarch in his fight against Shemu 'el b. Eli, Maimonides ultimately advised him against opening the school in Baghdad or otherwise involving himself further in the exilarch's affairs. He was wary of the involvement with high-

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<sup>55</sup> BM Or.2598.162a-b. The shelfmark is not on FGP. A short description and transcription of the document: J. Leeven, “A Letter of Daniel ben Eleazar He-Ḥasid: Rosh Yeshibah shel Golah” *JQR* Vol. 16 No. 4 (April 1926), 395-97.

level gentile politics that the exilarch's position entailed, and he declared that righteous men should, instead, avoid getting involved in politics, altogether:

You undoubtedly know, my son: that the high positions of authority in government that some of our people occupy in our day, I do not regard as a boon or as a mark of good fortune. As a matter of fact, as God lives, such positions are fraught with no little danger inasmuch as they are debilitating and exhausting. The perfect man who seeks ultimate success should focus his attention on the perfection of his own spiritual faculties and commitments and remain aloof from an activity that concomitantly provokes discreditable public opinion and indecent standards.<sup>56</sup>

Ultimately, Maimonides warned Yosef that “[i]t is far better for you to earn a single drachma as a weaver, tailor, or carpenter, than to be dependent on the license of the Exilarch.”<sup>57</sup> One should probably not take this argument at face value, as it came from a former Head of the Jews and Ayyubid court physician. Still, Maimonides did recognize the extent to which the Jews of his day, particularly those of Iraq, sought out high level government positions and derived their prestige, in part, from their privileged relationship with the Abbasid caliph.

Jewish officials in Late Abbasid Baghdad adopted and internalized the manners and idioms of the Abbasid court. Like their elite Muslim contemporaries, Jewish government officials sought the services of poets to compose panegyrics in their honor, and they adopted Arabic *laqabs*, honorific titles purportedly issued by the state and denoting the title-holder's loyalty and service to the state. This phenomenon is most notable in the *Diwan* of El 'azar b. Ya'aqov Ha-Bavli, a poet patronized by the Jewish elite of Baghdad, most of whom were affiliated with the Babylonian yeshivot. El 'azar wrote mostly in Hebrew, although he structured his poems according to Arabic poetic models. He used biblical and mishnaic imagery and idioms

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<sup>56</sup> Maimonides Letter, ed. Baneth. Translation: Leon D. Stitskin, *Letters of Maimonides: Translated and Edited with Introduction and Notes* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1977), 84-85.

<sup>57</sup> Maimonides “Letter to Yosef Ibn Akin.” Translation: Stitskin, *Letters*, 83.

to glorify his patrons. Consider the lines that he composed in honor of the director of the mint (*nāzir dār al-ḍarb*) Shams al-Dawla ibn Kurrātha (Hebrew name Shemu'el):

You who look for wealth, hurry to Prince Shemu'el, the charm of the kingdom ...  
How do they envy him! It is he, the right hand of God, whom the kingdom appointed  
over the people.<sup>58</sup>

“Charm of the kingdom” is an indirect translation of his *laqab*, *Shams al-Dawla* (Sun of the State), which very much referred to the Abbasid State. And the “kingdom” that appointed him over the people as the Director of the Mint was none other than the Abbasid sovereign.

Another example is the panegyric in honor of a certain Ibn al-Harabiyah. According to the Judeo-Arabic introduction, Elazar composed this poem upon his return to the office of *nāzir dār al-ḍarb* (director of the mint):

Master of the splendor of Mordekhai, faithful one of the kingdom  
And strength of princes, desired by the king and his noblemen,  
He goes out in the splendor of the kingdom  
and its poets and musicians welcomed him with songs.<sup>59</sup>

The “splendor of the kingdom” might refer to the special clothing that this official was entitled to wear by virtue of his position in Abbasid administration, while the poets and musicians refer to the poets and musicians of the Abbasid court.

And, in a panegyric to a certain Muhadhdhib al-Dawla ben Mordekhai, Elazar invokes the official's service to the yeshiva and service to the Abbasid state in the same verse:

The stars of the kingdom (*kohvey malukha*) radiate on him...  
He was a master to the Deputy of the Yeshiva  
And to the kingdom and the minsters a treasure.<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, the geonim regularly addressed their followers by their Arabic *laqabs*, often translated into Hebrew. In doing so, they glorified the idea of loyalty and service to the Abbasid

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<sup>58</sup> Wout Van Bekkum, *The Secular Poetry of El'azar ben Ya 'aqov Ha-Bavli* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 14-5.

<sup>59</sup> ENA286.

<sup>60</sup> ENA171. Van Bekkum, *The Secular Poetry*, 200.

state, equating it rhetorically to other forms of Jewish authority. Consider the way in which the gaon addressed the Jewish official Mevorakh al-Barkulī Mu'tamid al-Dawla in a Hebrew letter extending greetings and blessings before Sukkot. The letter begins in Hebrew, addressing the official as:

Our prince and noble one, the exalted honored prince, Mar Rav Mevorakh, Prince of the Party, faithful one of the kingdom (*ne 'eman ha-malkhut*), glory of the princes, crown of the Levites, treasured one of the Yeshiva.<sup>61</sup>

In addressing this official, the gaon invokes the “three crowns.” “Treasure of the Yeshiva” implies the crown of Torah. “Crown of the Levites” invokes the “crown of priesthood,” and the Hebrew phrase *ne 'eman ha-malkhut* evokes the “crown of sovereignty” (*malkhut*). The phrase itself, however, was a loose translation of Mevorakh's Arabic *laqab*, Mu'tamid al-Dawla. The *malkhut* in this formulation is the *malkhut* of the Abbasid State, not the *malkhut* of the Davidic line.

This form of address was rather common. In another letter from 1207, a gaon extends greetings to Al-Barkulī in almost the same way:

The exalted honored prince Mar Rav Mevorakh, Prince of the *edah* (unit) and faithful one of the kingdom,<sup>62</sup> glory of the princes, crown of the select Levites, treasure of the Yeshiva, a man with a generous soul, and a beneficent hand, and a noble aroma, and ample gifts.<sup>63</sup>

His son, Shemu 'el b. Mevorakh b. al-Barkulī was addressed in Hebrew in a similar fashion:

The exalted prince Mar rav Shemu 'el, Sun of the Princes, glory of the select Levites, delight of the Yeshiva...son of our exalted prince Mar Rav Mevorakh, Faithful one of the kingdom, crown of the princes.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> It continues in Judeo-Arabic: “May God make noble the exalted Mu'tamid al-Dawla (supporter of the state), Amīn al-Mulk (Faithful one of the kingdom), beauty of the heads/chiefs.” Assaf III, 49-50.

<sup>62</sup> A search through the PGP for this phrase reveals just one result, also from the thirteenth century: a memorial list. T-S8J11.2.

<sup>63</sup> Assaf, III, 56. MS 105 7a.

<sup>64</sup> Assaf, III, 55. MS 105, 6v.



Even in correspondence relating to an upcoming Jewish holiday, they addressed their followers by making reference to their privileged relationship with the gentile authorities. The geonim were officially part of Abbasid administration, and they derived their power and authority from the Abbasid caliph.

Yet in contrast to the exilarch, whose propaganda often invoked his close relationship with the Abbasid caliph, the geonim of twelfth and thirteenth-century Baghdad never explicitly referred to the nature of their relationship with the Abbasid state in their correspondence. Instead, they preferred to use more neutral terms like the Hebrew *malkhut* or *malukhah* to refer to the governing authorities. The following section contrasts the ways in which exilarch and the geonim characterized their relationship with the Abbasid state during this period, and it explores the implications of the differences in their respective approaches for understanding the exercise of rabbinic authority during the final years of the Abbasid caliphate.

#### “In the Shadow of the Delight of the Kingdom”: The Exilarch and the Caliph

In 1161, the exilarch Daniel b. Ḥisday wrote a letter appointing Netanel Ha-Levi b. Moshe as his deputy in Egypt.<sup>65</sup> In doing so, he also invited the Jews of Egypt to submit petitions to the Abbasid caliph:

Our existence in these lands is happy. Our god has turned his favor toward us in the eye of the holy sublime *imami* prophetic pure station of Al-Mustanjida b-allah. May God make permanent the strength of his kingdom and raise his crown over all of the inhabitants of the world and may his name and his kingdom remain upright forever. We and the community of Israel are in the shadow of the delight of the kingdom, may our legs not wobble in its days. The obligation on us and on all of

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<sup>65</sup> It is interesting to note that this letter was written before the Ayyubids of Egypt officially declared loyalty to the Abbasid caliph. Yet we know that during this period, the Fatimid caliphate was in steep decline, and al-Mustanjid sent spies to try to advance his authority in Egypt. Was the Abbasid government involved in the decision to open a yeshiva under the exilarch's control in Egypt? It is difficult to say. Nevertheless, encouraging Egypt's Jews to submit petitions and requests to the Abbasid authorities would help lay a foundation for the Abbasid caliph's claims to authority in Egypt.

Israel is to persist in requests and petitions via his kingdom to the god of the Heavens. And may the lord establish his throne forever. Selah.<sup>66</sup>

Here, Daniel b. Ḥisday depicts the Abbasid caliph, not as inherently oppressive, but as an ally of “the community of Israel” who responds to the petitions of the community as mediated through him, the highest ranked Jewish leader. In the letter, otherwise written in Hebrew, the exilarch invokes the traditional blessings for the Abbasid caliphs in Arabic. As Franklin argues, in doing so, the exilarch implicitly drew a parallel between the Davidic dynasty and the noble lineage of the Abbasid caliphs.<sup>67</sup>

Petaḥya of Regensburg visited Baghdad after the death of the exilarch Dani’el b. Ḥisday. In his account, the favorable situation of the Jewish community of Baghdad was due to the Abbasid caliph. He too portrayed the office of the exilarch as something of a parallel to the office of the caliph, due to the genealogical prestige of both offices:

The monarch who reigned in the days of Rabbi Shelomoh, father of Rabbi Dani’el [the exilarch], was a friend of Rabbi Shelomoh, because the monarch was of the seed of Muhammad and the exilarch descended from King David.<sup>68</sup>

Although this account should not be taken literally, it represents the kinds of narratives that propagandists for the exilarch would have advanced. For Jews, the offices of exilarch and caliph had something of a dialectical relationship with each other.

The implicit comparison between the authority of the exilarch and that of the Abbasid caliph is most apparent in the account of Benjamin of Tudela, who recorded a lengthy, laudatory description of the Abbasid caliph and the city of Baghdad:

Thence it is two days to Baghdad, the great city and royal residence of the Caliph Amīr al-Mu’minin al-‘Abbāsī of the family of [Muhammad<sup>69</sup>]. He is at the head of

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<sup>66</sup> T-S8J2. Assaf III, 72.

<sup>67</sup> Franklin, *This Noble House*, 63.

<sup>68</sup> Petaḥya, *Sibbuv*, 21.

<sup>69</sup> Benjamin uses the Hebrew term *meshuga* (crazy) to refer to Muhammad, a common Hebrew idiom. For Jacobs, the inclusion of this derogatory term alongside respectful laudatory Arabic terms for the caliph’s office “testifies to the dilemma faced by a medieval Jewish author who sought to pen a credible account, but was unable to

the Islamic religion, and all the kings of Islam obey him; he occupies a similar position to that held by the pope over the Christians. He has a palace in Baghdad three miles in extent. ... There, the great king, Al-‘Abbasi holds his court, and he is kind to Israel, and many belonging to the people of Israel are his attendants; he knows all languages and is well-versed in the law of Israel. He reads and writes the holy language [Hebrew]. ... He is truthful and trusty, speaking peace to all men.<sup>70</sup>

In Benjamin of Tudela’s narrative, the Jews’ favorable and close relations with the Abbasid caliph, the supreme religious and political authority in the Islamic world were responsible for the wealth, prestige, wisdom, and just rule of Baghdad’s Jewish community:

In Baghdad there are about 40,000 Jews, and they dwell in security, prosperity, and honor under the great Caliph; and amongst them are great sages, the heads of Academies engaged in the study of the law.<sup>71</sup>

But most significantly, it was the exilarch’s close relationship with the Abbasid caliph, and the respect that the Muslims gave him, that ensured the prestige of Baghdad’s Jews. According to Benjamin, the exilarch conducted himself like a king or high level official, wearing ornate clothing and sitting atop a horse:

And every fifth day when he goes to pay a visit to the great caliph, horsemen, gentiles as well as Jews, escort him and heralds proclaim in advance, “make way before our lord, the son of David as is due unto him” ... He is mounted on a horse, and is attired in robes of silk and embroidery, with a large turban on his head, and from the turban is suspended a long white cloth adorned with a chain upon which the cipher of Muhammad is engraved. There, he appears before the caliph and kisses his hand, and the caliph rises and places him on a throne which Muhammad had ordered to be made for him, and all the Muslim princes who attend the court of the caliph rise up before him.<sup>72</sup>

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acknowledge the religious authority implied by the titles he cited.” Martin Jacobs, *Reorienting the East: Jewish Travelers to the Medieval Muslim World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 126. This term might also have been introduced into the manuscript tradition at a later date. Petahya uses the Hebrew Mahameṭ to refer to Muhammad.

<sup>70</sup> Benjamin of Tudela, *Travels*, ed. Adler, 95-96.

<sup>71</sup> This is more likely a reference to the ten *allufim* of the yeshiva.

<sup>72</sup> Benjamin, *Travels*, 100.

In this narrative, the exilarch wears a chain engraved with the cipher of Muhammad and is placed on a throne that “Muhammad had ordered to be made for him.” Benjamin’s depicts the exilarch’s prestige and authority as derived from distinctly Islamic institutions of leadership.

The fact that both Benjamin and Petaḥyah recorded such laudatory depictions of Baghdad and the Abbasid caliph and his treatment of the city’s Jews suggests that the Jews of Baghdad whom they met promulgated these narratives as well—and that such claims were central to Babylonian Jewish claims to authority in the late-twelfth century.

#### “By me, kings rule”: Geonic Ideology of the State

The surviving geonic writings do not make explicit references to the Abbasid caliph in the same way as letters and propaganda in favor of the exilarch. Although they used the state to enforce their rule, the surviving geonic writings never refer by name to a specific caliph or invoked the traditional Arabic blessings on the Abbasid caliph. And despite Petaḥyah’s account of Shemu’el b. ‘Eli conducting himself “like a king”, none of the surviving Jewish accounts from Baghdad referred to meetings between the gaon and the caliph or tried to promote the gaon as parallel to the caliph, as they had for the exilarch.

It is possible that the Jews of Iraq during this period were, themselves, ambivalent about Shemu’el b. ‘Eli’s efforts to marginalize the office of the exilarch. After all, both offices had co-existed in Iraq for centuries. Maybe the geonim did not invoke their direct relationship with the caliph in their writings so as not to provoke supporters of the yeshivot who still revered the office of the exilarch.

I argue, however, that this phenomenon is due to the ambivalence of the geonim, themselves, about their new political position. On the one hand, they were happy to continue to

use the Abbasid state to enforce their rule and took pride in positions that their allies held within Abbasid administration. On the other hand, geonic investiture represented a major institutional change that challenged the rabbis' policy, dating back to the Buyid period or even the Talmudic era, of separating themselves rhetorically from the corruption of political power. As a result, during this period the geonim invoke their ties with the state implicitly—to enforce their rule over the communities under their jurisdiction, to ensure that officials remained loyal to them and delivered the requisite funds to which they were entitled. They declined to refer explicitly to the very real, subordinate relationship between their office and that of the Abbasid caliph.

The geonim had, historically, separated themselves on a rhetorical level from the “corruption” inherent in politics. They asserted that any individual who held office only at the mercy of gentile rulers (as opposed to according to the consensus of the Jewish community) was illegitimate and should not command authority in the Jewish community. How, then, could the geonim reconcile their past scorn for investiture with their new political status that directly subordinated them to the Abbasid caliph? They now needed to make sure that the Jews under their jurisdiction did, in fact, obey the decrees of the government.

To solve this conundrum, the geonim advanced a narrative that represented the antithesis of their actual political relationship with the Abbasid caliph. In this narrative, the rabbis, as sages of Torah, which predates the world, invest kings with authority and give them license to rule—not the other way around. Consider Shemu'el's Letter to Zekharya *Av Beit Din* of the Yeshiva in Ḥalab, investing him with authority over the communities there that is dated to Tammuz 1190:

Know, our brothers, that the beloved Torah existed before the world was raised by His thought. [This refers to a discussion in Pesahim 54a]. As it is written, “The lord made me as the beginning of His way, the first of His works of old.” [Proverbs 8:22]. And from (the Torah) sovereignty, kings, kingdoms (are derived). As it is written, “By me, kings rule, and ministers decree justice. By me, princes rule and

nobles, even all the judges of the earth. I love them that love me, and all who seek me earnestly shall find me.” [Proverbs 8:15-17].<sup>73</sup>

In this way, the geonim assert that the actual political authorities of their own day rule only by the Torah and according to the will of God. Rather than subordinating the yeshiva to the state, the yeshiva, in this formulation, subordinates the governing authorities to the will of God.

“Greetings from the king who governs nations”

Beginning in 1186, the geonim included an additional “greeting” clause in their letters. This literary clause extended greetings from God and from his ministering angels, typically employing biblical epithets. Out of twenty four letters complete with an introduction published by Assaf, sixteen include a version of this clause.<sup>74</sup> For example, the aforementioned letter from Shemu’el to Zekharya drew on Psalms 103:20 to extended greetings from

God who knows what is manifest and what is secret, who dwells in secret, and from his ministering angels who sing songs of praise before him, mighty of strength to do his will, and from the gate of the yeshiva.<sup>75</sup>

Later on in the same letter, the gaon explicitly drew on Talmudic imagery (Nedarim 20a) to equate the rabbis of the yeshiva with God’s ministering angels:

And [The Torah] is connected as a crown to those who occupy themselves with Torah for its own sake (*Torah l’shma*). And the beloved sages of Torah are like the eminent ministering angels (*malakhei ha-sharet*) ... as they are distinguished [in fine clothing].<sup>76</sup>

Or in a letter to the community of Waqf from 1206, the gaon greeted the community on behalf of

The king who governs nations to whom sovereignty is due, and from the angels of heaven, regiments of poets praising his name, and from the gate of the yeshiva.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Assaf, Letters, Pt. II, 60.

<sup>74</sup> Manuscript I: No. 1, 4, 18, 19, 23, 25, 26, 27, 30, 35. Manuscript II: 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13.

<sup>75</sup> Assaf, Letters Pt. II, 60.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Assaf, Letters, II, 46.

Why did the geonim of the late-twelfth century include a clause extending greetings on behalf of God, while their predecessors in the Babylonian yeshiva did not do so? It is possible that this is mere boilerplate poetic language, just a metaphor to emphasize the loftiness of the yeshiva.

At the same time, the Abbasid caliph promoted himself as “the shadow of God upon Earth.” Many of the epithets that the geonim used in this clause referred to God as a ruler, or heavenly king, enthroned by angels. Perhaps, then, the clause functioned on two levels. On the one hand, it did, in fact, extend greetings to the recipients on behalf of the Abbasid caliph, assuring them that they remained in his favor and reminding them that the gaon could intercede on their behalf before him. On the other hand, it allowed the geonim to assert their rhetorical independence from gentile political power and remind their followers that, by being loyal to the yeshiva and paying annual dues, they obeyed the laws of heaven, not the laws of a gentile king. A more systematic comparison with other geonic letters, particularly from Palestine, is necessary to ascertain the significance of this clause.<sup>78</sup>

Interestingly, in letters to disloyal communities, the gaon omitted the “God clause” in the introduction and only extended greetings from “the gate of the yeshiva.” For example, in a letter to the communities of Daqūqa, Baqasri, and Shahargad, which had apparently cut off relations with the yeshiva, Shemu’el warned:

Do they not know that the ancient ones, may their memory be a blessing, said: Whoever does not follow the laws of heaven is given the yolk of the government? We considered this for a moment until we gave up all hope of the arrival of their messages and letters. And we said: “Perhaps something happened to them that occupied them and they were turned away unexpectedly from it.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> In fact, in the eleventh century, the Palestinian Gaon Shelomo b. Yehudah, who did hold investiture from the Fatimid caliph, included a similar clause in some of his letters, extending greetings from *ṣur ya ‘aqov* “the rock of Jacob,” an epithet for God. See, e.g., Letters of Shelomo b. Yehudah Gaon: Gottheil-Worrel 5r, l.5; T-S18J4.17r, l.9; T-S13J14.16r, l.6; Bodl. MS Heb.a3.3r, l.4; Gil, Palestine, doc. 54, 59, 74 doc. 78. Letters of Avraham b. Shelomo b. Yehudah Gaon: T-S13J26.1r, l.9; Bodl MS Heb c 28, f. 15, l.5; Gil, Palestine, doc. 88, 89.

<sup>79</sup> Assaf, “Letters” Pt. III, 40.

The letter draws a rhetorical separation between obedience to the yeshiva—and by extension, God—and being at the mercy of the inherently oppressive gentile government. By holding investiture, the geonim might have contributed to the caliph's imperial project of advancing his rule over Baghdad's Jews, but the geonim promoted themselves as representatives of heaven.

## Conclusion

The ideological and administrative reforms of the later Abbasid caliphs promoting centralized rule also had the effect of incorporating more Jewish notables into the orbit of state administration and Abbasid courtly life. This manifested itself, most significantly, in the granting of investiture to the geonim. It also impacted the internal life of the Jewish community. The geonim not only depended on the government to protect their own autonomy and control over those individuals subject to their *reshut*, but also relied on the state to enforce the documents they issued. They addressed their supporters by their Arabic *laqabs* and construed service to the Abbasid state as equivalent to service to the yeshiva. At the same time, the granting of investiture meant that the geonim could make the rather unprecedented argument for eliminating the position of exilarch altogether.

The close ties with the state led Jewish leaders in Iraq in the early thirteenth century to extol the Abbasid state and those who served it. Yet in contrast to the exilarchs, who promoted themselves as the supreme authority among Jews due to the authority with which the Abbasid caliph invested them, the geonim did not explicitly refer to their political relationship with the Abbasid state in their writings. Instead, they rhetorically reversed the relationship to claim that gentile kings held authority only according to God and Torah and, by extension, the yeshiva itself.



Overall, the sources indicate that the Jewish community of Iraq during the final years of the Abbasid Caliphate was wealthy, prestigious, and powerful. With the support of a temporarily re-invigorated and independent Abbasid caliph, the geonim re-asserted claims for Babylonian rabbinic supremacy in the Jewish world. Yet Jewish historiography has marginalized the Babylonian yeshivot of this period as institutions in decline and largely irrelevant to most Jews. This characterization of the Babylonian yeshivot in the later period is a reflection, less of actual historical events, than of medieval Jewish polemics. Chapter 5 investigates the construction of this narrative of the decline of the Babylonian yeshivot.

## Chapter 5: “No Need of Babylonia”? The Construction of Rabbinic Authority in the Eleventh and Twelfth Century Mediterranean

The Babylonian Yeshivot and Exilarchate were some of the longest-lasting institutions in the medieval Jewish world. They came into being before the Islamic conquest of Iraq, moved to the Abbasid imperial capital of Baghdad in the eighth and tenth centuries, respectively, and continued to operate there even after the Mongol conquest of the city in 1258. Yet traditional Jewish historiography marks the end of the “Geonic Era” in the middle of the eleventh century, thus minimizing the significance of the yeshivot in later years.<sup>1</sup> The past two chapters have demonstrated how the yeshivot continued to play a role in Jewish political life in Iraq long after Hayya Gaon’s death. Was Babylonia as irrelevant to Jewish communal life in other places as previous scholars have assumed? Was there a direct relationship between the collapse of Abbasid imperial power and the decline of Babylonian rabbinic authority throughout the Jewish world?

This chapter investigates how Jewish communities in the Mediterranean and in Europe related to and characterized the Babylonian yeshivot during the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. Part I argues that the destruction of urban centers in North Africa and the Levant as well as internal turmoil in the Fatimid Caliphate during the second half of the eleventh century did, in fact, diminish long-distance political, economic, and religious ties between Egyptian and Babylonian Jews. This led Mediterranean Jewish leaders to claim halakhic authority for themselves without receiving titles from the Babylonian yeshivot. Yet the Babylonian yeshivot during the Seljuq period (c. 1055-1160) continued to command the loyalties of some Jews in the

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<sup>1</sup> On the evidence for the gaonate and the exilarch in Baghdad after 1040, see Jacob Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature* (New York: Ktav, 1972), 202-48. Also, see Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael* [Hebrew or English], secs. 261-268.

Indian Ocean. Part II explores the implications of the renewal of trans-Mediterranean connections between Iraq, Europe, and the Mediterranean in the middle of the twelfth century. It contends that this catalyzed a *halakhic* and historiographic tradition either explaining the transfer of rabbinic authority to the west or denying the authority of Babylonia altogether. Part III argues that these challenges led rabbinic leaders in Babylonia to emphasize the halakhic significance of their location in Babylonia itself, and many Jews worldwide continued to accept and promote these claims to Babylonian halakhic supremacy.

### **Part I: Babylonia and the *Nagids* of the Mediterranean**

As Chapter 2 argues, individuals traveled between Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and the wider Mediterranean constantly during the Buyid era (c. 945-1040), and Jewish notables throughout the region maintained a prolific correspondence with each other. A lucrative Mediterranean trade and the relatively porousness of the political borders between Fatimid and Buyid territories made this network possible. Merchants from as far away as Iran sought to penetrate Mediterranean trade networks, and the Fatimids and Buyids actively missionized in each other's territories. The Babylonian geonim relied on these trade networks to solicit halakhic queries from and distribute responsa to their followers throughout the Mediterranean. A time of political fragmentation had actually united the Rabbanite Jewish world: by the end of this period, most Rabbanite Jews throughout the Mediterranean recognized the authority of the Babylonian tradition as transmitted through the Babylonian yeshivot.

Jewish notables in Egypt and the Western Mediterranean often studied in the yeshivot to become scholars in their own right. They assumed responsibility for the day-to-day operations of Jewish communal institutions far from Baghdad and Jerusalem. They appealed to the Babylonian

geonim only for advice on particularly challenging points of Jewish law. Nevertheless, their symbolic relationship to the geonim was crucial for the claims to authority that they made within their own communities; the local leaders received titles from the Babylonian and Palestinian yeshivot, sent donations to them, and facilitated the transmission of geonic responsa and other texts throughout the Mediterranean.<sup>2</sup>

This situation changed during the second half of the eleventh century. The Seljuqs conquered much of Fatimid-controlled Syria between 1050 and 1080. Recent archaeological studies have found that Tiberias, Ramla, and Jerusalem all experienced major decline and destruction during the 1050s and 1060s, a result of both the effects of the conquests and other natural disasters.<sup>3</sup> In North Africa, the Zirid rulers rebelled against the Fatimid caliph, and in retaliation, the caliph sent the Banū Sulaym and Banū Hilāl tribes after them. They destroyed major urban centers and port cities including Qabes and Qayrawan in 1051 and 1057, respectively.

These events appear to have caused interruptions in long-distance Mediterranean trade, particularly through Egypt. The vast majority of merchant letters found in the Geniza dating to the second half of the eleventh century dealt with trade between locations within Egypt only.<sup>4</sup> While trade connections between Egypt and al-Andalus were widespread during the first half of the eleventh century, the last documented eleventh century voyage between Egypt and al-

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<sup>2</sup> Menahem Ben Sasson, "Varieties of Intercommunal Relations in the Geonic Period.

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of recent archaeological scholarship, see Ronnie Ellenblum, *The Collapse of the Eastern Mediterranean: Climate Change and the Decline of the East, 950-1072* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 163-195. Ellenblum argues that the decline of urban centers was due to climate change, which also provoked nomadic movements and conquests, an assertion that has been challenged by Peacock and others. Overall, the question of "decline" or the reasons for the "decline" are not relevant to the issues of this chapter; Syria and Fustat became isolated politically from each other, regardless of the extent of the "decline" of its urban centers. On the decline in long-distance trade with Northern Syria during this period, see Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions*, 309-12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 300-5. Note also that southern Syria functioned as a hinterland in relation to Fustat.

Andalus is from 1045.<sup>5</sup> Phillip Ackerman-Lieberman's preliminary study of toponymic surnames (*nisbas*) in the Geniza corpus found the smallest number of foreign *nisbas* overall in around 1070, suggesting that fewer foreign-born individuals traveled to or settled in Egypt at that time.<sup>6</sup> Because the Babylonian geonim relied on these long-distance Mediterranean mercantile networks to transport their letters (particularly the networks of the Ibn 'Awkal family that were deposited in the Geniza), this had the effect of partially cutting off relations between the yeshivot of Babylonia and their followers in the Mediterranean. This also helps to explain why no Iraqi material has been found in the Cairo Geniza from the Seljuq period.

When cut off from regular correspondence with the geonic centers, Mediterranean Jewish officials who had once needed to maintain an active correspondence with geonic leadership to legitimate their authority assumed most geonic prerogatives for themselves. This was a gradual process, exemplified by the Egyptian leadership's changing use of honorific titles during the second half of the eleventh century. After 1043, the court physician Yehudah b. Sa'adya (dated docs 1043-1077) held the titles of *Rosh Kalla* of the Babylonian Yeshiva and *he-ḥaver ha-me'ulle* (excellent ḥaver) of the Palestinian Yeshiva. He received the title of *Nagid* (prince) between 1062 and 1064 from the Palestinian gaon, and he functioned as the single leader of Egyptian Jewry, while still symbolically deferring to the yeshiva of Palestine.<sup>7</sup> After Yehudah's death in 1078, his brother Mevorakh b. Sa'adya assumed his position. Mevorakh, held the title of *ḥaver* of the Palestinian yeshiva, as well as *alluf ha-binot*, a Babylonian title.<sup>8</sup> Mevorakh declared

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 312-9.

<sup>6</sup> Phillip Ackerman-Lieberman, "Jewish Onomastics, the Cairo Geniza, and Westward Migration in the Medieval Period", The Twelfth Annual International Conference on Jewish Names, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel, March 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen, *Jewish Self-Government in Medieval Egypt*, 160-1.

<sup>8</sup> Some have suggested that Mevorakh received his title from Daniel b. 'Azarya, a scion of the Babylonian exilarchal family who became the gaon of Palestine in the 1060s, assuming that no yeshivot were in operation in Baghdad during this period. Yet Mevorakh and Daniel b. 'Azarya's son (David) were enemies who fought for control over Egyptian Jewry during the latter half of the eleventh century. Moreover, when Mevorakh ousted David b. Daniel b.

himself “head of the Jews” and appointed judges, assuming responsibility for the judiciary from the gaon of Palestine. At that point, however, he retained his title of *Haver* of the Palestinian yeshiva and *alluf ha-binot* of Babylonia, still paying symbolic homage to the traditional centers even as he slowly assumed responsibility for what had previously been solely under the purview of the gaon. In 1082, his rival, David b. Daniel b. ‘Azarya, a scion of the family of exilarchs from Babylonia whose father was the gaon of Palestine, ousted Mevorakh b. Sa‘adya from office and declared himself “head of the Jews.” David expanded the power of the new position by establishing a high rabbinic court in Egypt, further appropriating what had traditionally been the prerogatives of the Palestinian Yeshiva.

When Mevorakh b. Sa‘adya overthrew David and was accepted as head of the Jews for the second time in 1094, he took over and expanded the high court in Egypt. He appointed scholars as chief judges in Fustat and Cairo and accepted appeals from lower courts as the geonim had before.<sup>9</sup> To symbolize his separation from Palestinian authority, he stopped using his Palestinian title (*haver*). Instead, he accumulated nine additional titles that represented his complete separation from the Palestinian yeshiva and sovereignty over Egyptian Jewry.<sup>10</sup> Mevorakh had declared himself successor to the administrative functions of the Palestinian Gaon, yet he never went so far as to claim to have superseded the Babylonian geonim. He continued to use his title from the Babylonian yeshiva (*alluf ha-binot*) until his death, and he actively promoted Babylonian practices. In fact, he insisted that the Palestinian congregation follow the Babylonian liturgy as established by Sa‘adya Gaon.<sup>11</sup> Mevorakh also issued his own

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‘Azarya from office in 1094, Evyatar, gaon of Palestine, celebrated this development because it represented the cessation of Babylonian exilarchal claims for authority over Palestinian Jewry. Considering that a yeshiva was in operation in Baghdad during this period, it is more likely that Mevorakh received the title from Hezekiah Gaon of Baghdad or his successor than from Daniel b. ‘Azarya.

<sup>9</sup> Cohen, *Jewish Self-Government*, 248.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 264-6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 251-4.

*halakhic* rulings that built on geonic opinions, and he tried to obtain as many copies of geonic texts as possible.<sup>12</sup>

Although Mevorah b. Sa'adya held a title from the Babylonian yeshiva, he made no efforts to obtain a similar title for his son, Moshe, who succeeded him as Head of the Jews (c. 1112-1126). Mevorakh had assumed enough power and authority as head of the Jews in Egypt, a region now largely cut off both politically and economically from Iraq, that his successor no longer required even symbolic investiture from Babylonia. In essence, he had positioned himself and his family as the heirs to the intellectual, legal, and spiritual legacy of the Babylonian geonim. By the end of the eleventh century, Mediterranean Jews understood the geonim not as living authorities who issued their own rulings and granted titles legitimating the authority of local leaders, but as yet another layer of rabbinic textual authority for local rabbinic leaders to consult in order to derive Jewish law for their own communities.

Yet Jews continued to reside in Baghdad, and a yeshiva continued to operate in Baghdad and appoint geonim. Although Egypt was more isolated from Syria and Iraq than it had been during the Buyid era, some individuals continued to travel between the two places or encounter individuals from Iraq in travels to the Indian Ocean. These encounters, which forced Egyptian rabbinic leaders to reckon with the continued existence of the Babylonian yeshivot, led to conflict.

### Rabbinic Conflict in the Indian Ocean

Neither Mevorakh nor his successors truly succeeded in monopolizing the loyalties Egyptian Jews or countering the challenge that the continued existence of the Babylonian

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

yeshivot represented. This was partially because Jews of Egypt involved in trade in the Indian Ocean came into contact with Jews from other parts of the Islamic world who continued to defer to Babylonian authority. The Indian Ocean trade represented something of a political and religious frontier zone, for Jews and Muslims alike. Jewish traders throughout some twenty port cities in the Indian Ocean deferred to the authority of the Nagid of Aden, who was also styled *Sar ha-Qehillot* (prince of the communities). Although Aden was under Fatimid rule, most of the cities under the Nagid's jurisdiction, including ports in the Persian Gulf and the Malabar Coast, were not. As a result, the Nagid of Aden needed to mediate between Jews loyal to competing Jewish and Muslim authorities in Baghdad, Egypt, and Syria. Rather than zealously defending the supremacy of their own respective rabbinic leaders, Jewish traders in the Indian Ocean often deferred symbolically to Jewish authorities in many different places. For example, the most famous Nagid of Aden, Madhmūn b. Bundār (d. 1151), received titles from both the Babylonian Exilarch in Iraq and the Palestinian Gaon/Head of the Jews Maṣṣīah b. Shelomo in Cairo. Madhmūn mostly tried to mediate among the various merchants by maintaining good relations with both centers and sending lavish gifts to the yeshivot.<sup>13</sup>

Jewish merchants involved in trade with India traveled widely throughout the Islamic world and needed to ensure that the legal documents that they used were admissible in as many legal venues as possible. For example, the prominent merchant Avraham b. Yijū traveled between Egypt, Yemen, Sudan, and India.<sup>14</sup> Ibn Yijū's mobility explains why, in 1132 in Mangalore (India), he wrote a deed of manumission for his slave girl Ashū in the jurisdiction (*reshut*) of both the exilarch in Baghdad, Daniel b. Ḥisday and the Palestinian gaon/Head of the

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<sup>13</sup> Goitein & Friedman, *India Book*, 283ff.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 552.



Jews in Egypt, Maṣliaḥ b. Shelomo.<sup>15</sup> Goitein and Friedman suggest that Ibn Yijū freed Ashū in order to marry her. By using a dual-*reshut* clause in the manumission deed, Ibn Yijū ensured that the legal status of his children with Ashū would be protected, no matter where they traveled.

Similarly, in the synagogue in Aden, prayer-leaders typically pronounced the dual-*reshut* clause in the name of the Palestinian Gaon Maṣliaḥ b. Shelomo and the Exilarch in Baghdad.<sup>16</sup> Records from the India trade indicate that this practice did not go unchallenged. For example, at least two Geniza documents refer to a conflict over the *reshut* in 1134. According to a testimony recorded in the *Beit Din* of Aden, “[a] Persian man arrived in this land [Aden] ... and he said that he was descended from the house of David and the people threw their support behind him” and let him lead prayers in the synagogue. He pronounced the *reshut* in the name of the exilarch (*rosh golah*) only. When another man led prayers and also mentioned the name of Maṣliaḥ in the *reshut* formula, he was forced to issue a public apology and confession of sin. When the Torah was open, he stood up in the middle of the synagogue and declared:

Our companions! You informed me that when I was praying on Sunday, I transgressed when I referred to Our Lord Maṣliaḥ, and now it has become clear to me, thanks to God on high and to the community that I sinned against the lord, the God of Israel and against you all.<sup>17</sup>

It would appear that Madhmūn ceded to the demands of the faction loyal to the Babylonian exilarch and stopped demanding the recitation of the *reshut* in the name of the gaon of Palestine.<sup>18</sup> The incident demonstrates that even when Iraq was much more isolated from other parts of the Jewish world, Babylonian rabbinic authority was not confined to Abbasid territory.

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<sup>15</sup> SPIOS D-55.10. The document is discussed in Goitein & Friedman, *India Book*, 55-7; 632-3.

<sup>16</sup> T-S20.37r., l.9-10.

<sup>17</sup> T-S20.37r., l.35-37. The events are also alluded to in T-SAr.48.270v, l.6-8.

<sup>18</sup> On the changing relationship between the Jews of Yemen and Jewish authorities in Egypt, see Amir Ashur and Ben Outhwaite, “Between Egypt and Yemen in the Cairo Geniza,” *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 5 (2014): 198-219. Also *Idem.*, “An 11<sup>th</sup> Century Pledge of Allegiance to Egypt from the Jewish Community of Yemen,” *Chroniques du Manuscrit au Yemen* 22 (2016), 34-48.

Nevertheless, the issue was far from settled. As more Jews from different regions came into contact with each other in the second half of the twelfth century, anxieties over Babylonian rabbinic authority intensified.

## **Part II: Reestablishing Connections with the Western Mediterranean**

Various political changes during the twelfth century re-established connections between Baghdad, Egypt, and the wider Mediterranean, and further called into question the many claims to authority that Mediterranean rabbinic leaders were asserting. Most notably, the rise of the Crusader states, beginning in 1099, coupled with administrative changes under the Seljuqs in Syria, revitalized Mediterranean trade. Although southern Syria had previously functioned as a hinterland to Fustat and declined during the latter half of the eleventh century, it flourished during the twelfth century because of the renewed connections with Europe. At the same time, Seljuq *amīrs* in Syria tried to facilitate trade with the Crusader States because the tax on this trade was a major source of their revenue. To this end, they negotiated treaties with the Crusader states for safe passage for trading caravans between Seljuq and Crusader territory.<sup>19</sup> Crusader Syria became a nexus of international trade, transmitting goods between the Latin-Christian West, the Islamicate Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean.<sup>20</sup>

The revitalization of mercantile networks between Fatimid Egypt, Crusader Syria, Seljuq Iraq, and Latin Europe attracted immigrants from all over the Jewish world. Travel between the Crusader States and Fatimid and Seljuq territory became more common. For example, Johannes

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<sup>19</sup> Stefan Heidemann, "Unislamic Taxes and an Un-Islamic Monetary System in Seljuq Baghdad," *International Symposium on Baghdad in the Islamic Civilization* (Istanbul: 2008), 499-500.

<sup>20</sup> On the impact of the Crusader States on Islamicate Jewry, see Brendan Goldman's unpublished dissertation. Nevertheless, there were no mercantile networks in the twelfth-century Geniza corpus as large or prominent as those from the eleventh century. Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions*, 311.

son of Treux, the son of a baron from Norman Italy, converted to Judaism, changed his name to ‘Ovadyah, and traveled throughout the Islamicate world in the early twelfth century. He journeyed to Seljuq Baghdad, where he studied in the Babylonian Yeshiva. Later, he traveled through Seljuq and Crusader Palestine, eventually settling in Fatimid Egypt, where he recorded a narrative of his journey.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, Jews from Al-Andalus fleeing Almohad persecution emigrated to and settled in the Eastern Mediterranean, including the poets Yehuda ha-Levi and Avraham b. ‘Ezra and their children. Most famously, Mūsā b. Maymūn (Maimonides), exiled from his native Cordoba, traveled across North Africa to Egypt, where he was declared Head of the Jews in 1171. The migrations meant that Jews from all over the Islamicate world found themselves in contact with Jews who deferred to different institutions of rabbinic authority, including the Babylonian geonim.

The cessation of Mediterranean Jewry’s ties with the Babylonian centers had been catalyzed by the political and economic transformation of the Eastern Mediterranean in the second half of the eleventh century. As individuals from throughout the Jewish world came into greater contact with each other during the twelfth century, they began to question how such a seismic shift in *halakhic* authority had arisen. Considering that there were geonim in Baghdad to whom Jews in Iraq and Persia deferred, what justified the Mediterranean Jews’ belief that geonic authority had ceased in the middle of the tenth or eleventh century? In a society that valued tradition above all else, what made this change legitimate and not heretical? To answer these questions, Jewish notables in the Mediterranean embarked on an ambitious historiographic project to construct the geonic past—or deny it altogether—and legitimate their own post-geonic present.

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<sup>21</sup> Norman Golb, “The Autograph Memoirs of Obadiah.”

## The End of the Geonic Period in Avraham b. Dawud's *Sefer Ha-Qabbala*

In 1160, the Spanish Rabbi Avraham b. Dawud composed his “Book of Tradition” (*Sefer ha-Qabbala*), the most significant Jewish historical chronicle produced in medieval Spain and one of the very few Jewish historical chronicles produced in the Middle Ages. The work sought to defend the truth of rabbinic Judaism against Muslim, Christian, and Karaite objections by giving evidence for an “uninterrupted chain of Jewish traditions who have transmitted a text on which all Jews unanimously agree” that had reached its apex in Ibn Dawud’s Christian Spain.<sup>22</sup> In justifying Spanish primacy in *halakhic* matters, Ibn Dawud asserted that the era of Babylonian geonic hegemony had come definitively to a close over a century earlier. In doing so, he simultaneously extolled and eulogized the Babylonian yeshivot.

In the text, he preserved four distinct, contradictory, and largely ahistorical narratives that explained the “decline” and closure of the Babylonian yeshivot. The first detailed Sa’adya Gaon’s death and the decline of his yeshiva of Mata Mahsiya/Sura:

R. Sa’adya passed away in 4702, when he was approximately fifty years of age, of black bile, having composed any number of worthwhile books and having accomplished great good for Israel. ... After the passing of R Sa’adya the academy of Mata Mahsiya declined steadily, and R Joseph<sup>23</sup> finally immigrated to the city of al-Basra and died there.<sup>24</sup>

In this way, Ibn Dawud described Sa’adya as the crowning glory of the Yeshiva of Sura/Mata Mahsiya. Consequently, any geonim who followed him were inconsequential.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Gerson D. Cohen, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah: The Book of Tradition by Abraham ibn Daud* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1967), xxix.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph was appointed gaon after Sa’adya’s excommunication by the exilarch David ben Zakkay; eventually Sa’adya and the exilarch reconciled, and both Sa’adya and Joseph received stipends from the yeshiva until their deaths.

<sup>24</sup> Cohen, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, 56-57.

<sup>25</sup> Ibn Dawud does mention Shemu’el b. Hofni, who succeeded Sa’adya as gaon of Mata Mahsiya decades later, saying, “[i]n those days the head of the academy in Mata Mahsiya was R. Shemu’el ha-Kohen b. Hofni, R. Hayya’s father-in-law. He too, composed many books. He passed away during R Hayya’s term, four years before the death of

The second narrative of geonic decline parallels the first, heaping praise on Hayya, the “final” gaon of the yeshiva of Pumbedita:

When [Sherira] saw that his life was prolonged and that his son, R. Hayya was worthy of being head of the academy, he stepped down in favor of his son. The latter was R. Hayya Gaon bar R. Sherira Gaon. He spread Torah abroad throughout Jewry more than all of the other geonim, and by his light walked those who sought the Torah from east and west. ... of the geonim before him there was none like him, and he was the last of the geonim.<sup>26</sup>

Ibn Dawud describes Hayya in superlative terms as the most learned of the geonim. Thus, his yeshiva (Pumbedita) reached its glory during his gaonate; after that, it ceased to be relevant for world Jewry.

Yet Babylonia still would have played a central role in the Jewish world due to the presence of the Babylonian Exilarch in Baghdad. The exilarch was a direct descendant of King David and a living reminder of ancient Jewish kingship and its promised restoration in the messianic age. Medieval Jews held Davidic ancestry in great esteem. Yet in Ibn Dawud’s narrative, all of the descendants of the Babylonian exilarch fled from Baghdad:

The members of R. Hayya’s academy appointed Hezekiah the exilarch, the grandson of David b. Zakkay to the see of R. Hayya, of blessed memory. He served for a term of two years. Then, informers denounced him to the king, and the latter imprisoned him, put him in chains, tortured him grievously, and left him no survivors. His two sons fled to Spain to R. Yosef ha-Levi the Naid b. R Shemu’el ha-Nagid who had great affection for Hezekiah the exilarch and head of the academy. They remained there with him until the time of the massacre in Granada when the nagid was killed. One of the sons of Hezekiah then fled to the land of Saragossa where he married and had children. Afterwards, his descendants migrated to Christian Spain.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, according to Ibn Dawud, the Davidic line was established in Spain. There was no need to esteem Babylonia as the seat of the exilarch when his entire family had come to reside in Iberia.

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R. Hayya.” Note that Shemu’el is described only in terms of his relationship with Hayya. Cohen, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, 60.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-2.

But what justified Spanish Jews' decisions to stop supporting the Babylonian yeshivot? Ibn Da 'ud explained the process by which "the income of the academies which used to come from Spain, the land of the Maghreb, Ifriqiya, Egypt, and the Holy Land was discontinued."<sup>28</sup> Four scholars traveling to a *Kallah* (rabbinic convention) were taken captive. Three were ransomed in Qayrawan, Cordoba, and Fustat, respectively. In each place, the scholar revealed the extent of his knowledge and opened up his own yeshiva that was independent of Babylonia. In Cordoba, in particular, the Spanish king was delighted that the Jews in his realm no longer had need of the Jews of Babylonia.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, might the decision to stop supporting the Babylonian yeshivot have amounted to heresy? Did the geonim in Babylonia excommunicate Spanish Jewry in retaliation? Ibn Dawud's narrative also provided an answer to this potential objection. R. Hanoq of Cordoba, one of the "four captives," excommunicated a certain Ibn Shatnash. After that,

Ibn Shatnash boarded a ship to the academy of Rabbeinu Hayya under the impression that Rebbeinu Hayya would receive him and that the latter was an enemy of R. Hanoq. [That impression] derived from the fact that the aforementioned four scholars had cut off the income of the academies, with the result that the academies were reduced to poverty. Nevertheless, Rabbeinu Hayya let him know that he should not come, for if he should come he would observe the ban declared by the Rabbi. Accordingly, Ibn Shatnash went off to Damascus, where he died.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, in Ibn Dawud's retelling, Hayya Gaon respected the rulings of the Spanish sages, even after they stopped supporting him financially.

Could one not object, however, that scholars remained in Baghdad after Hayya Gaon's death? What if, by cutting themselves off from Babylonia, the Spanish scholars had lost touch with a more authentic rabbinic tradition? Ibn Dawud also assuaged these doubts. According to

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-6.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-8.

Ibn Dawud, after Hayya Gaon's death, "all of Iraq had been left without a remnant of native Talmudic scholarship." In fact, Iraq was so bereft of Talmudic scholars that a certain R. Yiṣḥaq b. R. Moshe b. Sakrī of Denia (Spain), who had never even attained office in the Cordoba Yeshiva, "left ... for the East, where he was appointed gaon and occupied the seat" of Hayya Gaon.<sup>31</sup> By asserting that the native Iraqi Talmudic tradition had ceased to exist and that a relatively undistinguished Spanish rabbi took over the Babylonian Yeshiva, Ibn Dawud hoped to silence any suspicions that Talmud scholarship in Iraq was somehow more "authentic" than that of the Spanish rabbis.

Ibn Dawud's narrative of Babylonian decline and the transfer of rabbinic authority to Spain is remarkably convincing on a rhetorical level; it is also mostly contradicted by Geniza evidence. The alleged gaon of Baghdad, Ibn Sakrī, for example, is not attested to in any manuscript sources from Baghdad. Most significantly, R. Ḥushi 'el (one of the captives) traveled to Qayrawan long before Ibn Dawud claims, and his surviving letters in the Geniza indicate that he was never taken captive. Nevertheless, Ibn Dawud's account of Babylonian decline came to be incorporated into nearly every subsequent Jewish historical work into the twentieth century.<sup>32</sup> Even while acknowledging its clear literary, fictitious elements, Brody cited the text in order to substantiate his claim that the fragmentation of the Abbasid Caliphate in the middle of the tenth century had led to the transfer of rabbinic activity to the western Mediterranean.<sup>33</sup>

Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*

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<sup>31</sup> Cohen, *Sefer ha-Qabbala*, 82-3.

<sup>32</sup> Cohen, *Sefer ha-Qabbala*, xiii-xiv.

<sup>33</sup> Brody, *The Geonic of Babylonia*, 11-14.

Ibn Dawud recognized the significance of the Babylonian geonim for the *halakhic* past while denying their relevance to the *halakhic* present. By contrast, Maimonides instead denied that the Babylonian geonim had ever played an outsized role in Jewish tradition. In his introduction to the *Mishneh Torah* (c. 1178), Maimonides articulated a narrative of the transmission of rabbinic authority that minimized the significance of specific geographic places in general, and Babylonia in particular, for halakhic history:

All of the sages who lived after the canonization of the Talmud and analyzed it, and made a name for themselves through their wisdom are called geonim. And all of these Geonim who lived in Israel, Shinar (Babylonia), Spain, and France taught the ways of the Talmud, revealed its mysteries and explained its matters, since its path is very deep. Also, it is written in Aramaic with a mixture of other languages, since that language was the *lingua franca* of Shinar at the time of the canonization of the Talmud; but in other places and even in Shinar at the time of the Geonim, one would not know this language unless it was taught to him. The people of each city would ask many questions of their contemporary Gaon, requesting explanation for the difficult matters of the Talmud, and the geonim answered in accordance with their wisdom. The addressee would then gather the responses into books they would use for studying. The geonim of each generation also wrote books to explain the Talmud. ... This is the holy work in which all Israelite geonim were engaged, from the canonization of the Talmud until today, 1108 years after the destruction [1178 CE].<sup>34</sup>

In this way, the “geonim” are not confined to the Babylonian yeshivot, Babylonia, or even the Eastern Mediterranean. A “gaon” could be any post-Talmudic sage anywhere in the Jewish world. It was not simply that the Babylonian geonim had lost the *halakhic* primacy in the Jewish world that they once held; in Maimonides’ narrative, there had never been any Babylonian *halakhic* hegemony. Moreover, Maimonides’ use of the term Shinar to refer to Babylonia instead of Bavel allowed him to minimize rhetorically the connection between the geonim in Baghdad and the institutions to which they claimed to be the heirs. In Maimonides’ account, although the Talmud was written in Aramaic, the spoken language of Babylonia, even the geonim in

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<sup>34</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, 38-9.



Babylonia were ignorant of the language unless it was taught to them. The Babylonian geonim, therefore, were not distinguished by virtue of their connection with the land in which the Talmud was written, nor should their transmission or interpretation of the law be privileged over those of rabbis from other lands.

### **Part III: “The Place of Moses our Teacher”**

Yet these narratives were not universally accepted in the twelfth century. After all, there continued to be a gaon in Baghdad, and he continued to express traditional claims to Babylonian *halakhic* authenticity. Increasingly, these claims centered on the geographic “place” of the yeshiva. In contrast to Jews who claimed that the center of Torah scholarship had shifted to Egypt, North Africa, or Spain—or denied that it had ever even resided in Babylonia in the first place—the Babylonian geonim emphasized the continued primacy of Babylonia itself and its physical connection to the figure of Moses. As the gaon Shemu’el b. ‘Eli wrote to the communities of Syria:

The Place of the Yeshiva is the Throne of the Torah in the Place of Moses our Teacher, may God protect him, for all time. And the name of the “yeshiva” derives from the biblical phrase “And Moses sat (*va-yashev*) to judge the people” [Exodus 18:13], and it is the place appointed to teach Torah and Talmud, and we recite Halakha generation after generation all the way to Moses our Teacher about whom it was said: “And you should teach them the statutes and the Law (Torah) and show them the path that they should follow and the work that they must do.” [Ex 18:20]. And with that the Faith of Israel is preserved, what is in their hand from their beliefs is guarded, so that they do not go astray or turn away from these truths. Regarding this the Mishnah says: Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua and Joshua to the elders and the elders to the prophets to the prophets told it to the Men of the Great Assembly and this forms a continuous chain all the way to us. Thus the yeshiva is the place of Moses our Teacher and within it the faith of Israel is completed and everyone who shares in it. For it is the successor of the Lord of the Torah, in whose place it stands, and it succeeds Moses our Teacher, whose throne it is.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Assaf, “Letters of Samuel ben Eli,” pt. II, 51.

In this model, the yeshiva is not linked to Moses merely because its scholars join in a chain of transmission dating all the way back to Moses. Rather, the very place of the yeshiva is literally the “Throne of Torah in the Place of Moses.” As their counterparts in the Mediterranean tried to minimize the significance of the geographic place of Babylonia, the geonim instead asserted that their continued presence in Babylonia connected them directly to Moses himself and, by extension, the most authentic chain of *halakhic* transmission anywhere in the world.

Jewish travelers to Baghdad from Christian Europe accepted these claims. Both Benjamin of Tudela (Spain) and Petaḥya of Regensburg (Bavaria) who traveled through the region in the 1160s and 1170s wrote in glowing terms of Shemu‘el b. ‘Eli, the gaon of Baghdad. They emphasized the connection between the yeshiva of Baghdad and the figure of Moses on both a geographic and genealogical level. These accounts not only glorified the Babylonian yeshivot and advanced their claims to halakhic authenticity, but also circulated in many distinct manuscripts throughout Christian Europe.

In contrast to Avraham ibn Dawud, who was his contemporary from Christian Spain, Benjamin of Tudela did not depict the Babylonian Yeshiva as a shadow of its former self. In Benjamin’s account, the yeshiva continues to represent the most authentic connection between the Jews of his own day and the Jews of antiquity:

At the head of the great academy is the Chief Rabbi Shemu‘el b. ‘Eli. He is Rosh Yeshivat Gaon Ya‘aqov. He is a Levite and from the distinguished lineage of Moses our Teacher. ... R. El‘azar the son of Zemakh is the head of the order, and his pedigree reaches to Samuel the prophet, the Korahite. He and his brethren know how to chant the melodies as did the singers at the time when the Temple was standing.<sup>36</sup>

In this narrative, the gaon himself is a direct descendant of Moses, and thus the yeshiva’s connection to the revelation at Mount Sinai is embodied in his very person. Moreover, in

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<sup>36</sup> Benjamin, *Travels*, 38.

Benjamin's account, the yeshiva preserves the traditions of the Temple in Jerusalem—traditions that had been lost elsewhere in the Jewish world.

### Babylonian Rabbinic Authority in Ashkenaz

Ashkenazi Jews, like their Sephardic counterparts, understood themselves to be connected to Babylonian Rabbinic authority. Rabbi Gershom b. Yehudah (c. 960-1040) studied in the Babylonian yeshiva with Sherira and Hayya Gaon. Rashi (d. 1105) and claimed "all members of the Ashkenazi diaspora are students of [Rabbenu Gershom]," thus connecting the rabbinic tradition of Talmudic learning in Northern Europe (the school of the Tosafists in France) to that of Babylonia.<sup>37</sup> The Tosafist Simḥa b. Shmu'el of Vitry (d. 1105) included a prayer for the yeshivot in Babylonia and the Land of Israel in his Maḥzor Vitry, a guide to religious practice cited by the Tosafists throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>38</sup> The Pietists of Ashkenaz, a mystical movement that believed that there was a "hidden will of God" far beyond the laws delineated in the Torah, described themselves as the heirs to an esoteric Babylonian tradition transmitted through Northern Italy by a certain Abu Aharon of the Babylonian yeshiva:

[The Pietists of Ashkenaz] received the esoteric traditions about the arrangement of the prayers as well as the other esoteric traditions, rabbi from rabbi, all the way back to Abu Aharon the son of R. Shemu'el the Prince, who had left Babylonia because of a certain incident, and he was therefore required to travel all over the world.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ivan Marcus, "History, Story and Collective Memory: Narrativity in Early Ashkenazic Culture," *Prooftexts* 10, no.3 (Fall 1990): 365-88.

<sup>38</sup> Neil Danzig, "Two Insights from a Ninth-Century Liturgical Handbook: The Origins of Yeḳum Purqan and Qaddish de-Ḥadata," Stefan C. Reif (ed), *The Cambridge Geniza Collections: Their Contents and Significance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 20002).

<sup>39</sup> Ivan Marcus, "'History, Story and Collective Memory: Narrativity in Early Ashkenazic Culture," *Prooftexts* 10:3 (Fall, 1990), 372-373.

These narratives do not differ substantially from the ways in which such Sephardic Jews as Ibn Dawud also claimed to have received authentic Jewish tradition from Babylonia. Yet in contrast to their Sephardic counterparts, Ashkenazi Jews did not understand the continued existence of the Babylonian yeshivot as constituting a challenge to their own authority. Instead, they characterized the Babylonian yeshivot of their own day in overwhelmingly positive terms and advanced their claims to *halakhic* authenticity.

This is particularly apparent in the travel narrative of Petaḥyah of Regensburg, who visited Baghdad in the 1170s. Petaḥya was affiliated with both the Tosafists of France and the Pietists of Ashkenaz. Petaḥya's brother was the Tosafist R. Yitṣḥaq Ha-Lavan b. Ya'aqov. Yehudah He-Ḥasid, the leader of the Pietists of Ashkenaz, was his tutor and may have censored or otherwise helped shape Petaḥyah's travel narrative.<sup>40</sup> In his account, Petaḥya recorded a tradition linking the biblical Mount Sinai to Baghdad: "Both [Rabbi Sa'adya Gaon and Rabbi Hayya Gaon] are buried under a mountain. They say that from there to Mount Sinai, it is a single mountain. It is near Baghdad."<sup>41</sup> In this narrative, the Babylonian geonim are linked to revelation, not just through an authentic chain of rabbinic transmission, but through geography. The location of the yeshivot in Baghdad is metonymically linked to Mount Sinai, the place of revelation.

In Petaḥyah's narrative, the Jews of Babylonia were also distinguished by their knowledge and piety. In contrast to European Jews, for example, they were all so learned in Torah that the congregation did not need to rely on a *Ḥazzan* to chant Torah:

There are no ignorant Jews (*'Amei Ha-'areṣ*) in the whole of Babylonia, Assyria, Media and Persia who do not know all 24 books, and punctuation and grammar,

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<sup>40</sup> Jacobs, *Reorienting the East*, 35-7.

<sup>41</sup> Petaḥya, *Sibbuv*, 22. Translation: 23.

and superfluous and omitted letters. For the Ḥazzan does not read the Torah, rather whoever is called up to the *Sefer Torah* reads for himself.<sup>42</sup>

As Martin Jacobs argues, Petaḥyah extols Babylonian Jewish customs as a foil against the cultural depravity that the Pietists of Ashkenaz condemned in European Jewry.<sup>43</sup> In doing so, he described Babylonia as “very much a different world” from his own:

He stated that he did not see any woman while staying in Bavel, because they were all veiled and modest. Everyone has a mikveh in his courtyard. And no one offered up his prayer before he bathed. All travelers there travel in the night, on account of the heat. Everything grows there in winter as here in summer. Most of their labors are performed during the night. Bavel is very much a different world. The Jews cleave to Torah and fear heaven. Even the Ishmaelites are trustworthy.<sup>44</sup>

Regardless of the accuracy of the customs described here, this passage is significant for our purposes because it demonstrates the high esteem in which the Ashkenazim continued to hold Babylonia and Babylonian traditions. Rather than asserting that Babylonian *halakhic* primacy had been superseded and that Babylonia was a mere shadow of its former self as Ibn Dawud did, Petaḥyah instead looked to Babylonia as a paradigm of religious piety and authentic tradition.

Although the Tosafists of France differed slightly in their understanding of Jewish tradition from the Pietists of Ashkenaz, they too esteemed the Babylonian yeshivot and accepted their claims to an antique and unadulterated *halakhic* tradition. In the 1160s, the Tosafists of France wrote to Shemu’el b. ‘Eli Gaon asking him to resolve a dispute between Rabbeinu Tam and the other scholars of the yeshiva by clarifying “how [the text of a specific Talmudic passage] is copied in the books of the yeshiva,” and they asked him to specify the yeshiva’s custom regarding the matter in question. The gaon responded by copying what he described as “the true version [of the Talmudic text] ... which is from our rabbis, and our rabbis from our rabbis,

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<sup>42</sup> Petaḥyah, *Sibbuv*, 14.

<sup>43</sup> Jacobs, *Reorienting the East*, 173-4.

<sup>44</sup> Petaḥyah, *Sibbuv*, 42-45.

generation after generation all the way back to the sages of the Talmud [and] the versions verified by the ancient geonim.”<sup>45</sup> The fact that the Tosafists chose to write to the Babylonian yeshivot to ascertain the “true version” of the Talmudic text indicates that they accepted the Babylonian yeshivot’s geographic and genealogical claims.

Rather than posing a threat to the authority of Ashkenazi Jewish leaders, the continued existence of the Babylonian yeshivot connected the relatively newly-established and distant Jewish communities of northern Europe, particularly those devastated by the Crusades, to an ancient and prestigious rabbinic tradition. For many Jews during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, far from being a “backwater,” Babylonia continued to represent a link to the most authentic chain of Halakhic tradition and religious practices anywhere in the Jewish world.

## Conclusion

The second half of the eleventh century marked a transformation in the relationship between the Babylonian yeshivot in Iraq and Jewish communities throughout the Mediterranean. The decline of large-scale, long distance trade networks and political connections between Iraq and Egypt accounts for the absence of Iraqi material in the Cairo Geniza. Fewer connections and interactions between the two places led rabbinic and political leaders in the Mediterranean to refashion their own relationship to Babylonia.

By the end of the eleventh century, Jewish communities in Egypt and the Western Mediterranean had developed their own distinct institutions of rabbinic leadership. The new Jewish leaders promoted themselves as the successors to the Babylonian geonim, and their rule

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<sup>45</sup> Simcha Emanuel, “A Responsum of Shemu’el ben Ali Gaon of Baghdad to the Talmudic Scholars of France,” *Tarbitz* (1996), 93-100. [Heb]. The text in question comes from Pesahim 29b-30a.

depended, in part, on Baghdad's inaccessibility. This explains why the conflicts over the *reshut* clause in Indian Ocean port cities were particularly intense. In the twelfth century, connections between Iraq and the Mediterranean were gradually re-established, leading to even more bitter conflicts over *halakhic* authority. This catalyzed the development of a historiographic and *halakhic* tradition that explained the transfer of rabbinic authority to the West or tried to minimize the importance of Babylonia altogether. In response, the Babylonian geonim emphasized the significance of the geographic location of Babylonia, claiming direct genealogical descent from Moses and linking the place of the yeshiva to the place of Moses. Jews far from Baghdad found these claims to Babylonian supremacy compelling and useful for legitimizing their own communities.

Despite the significance of the relationship between Abbasid political power and the Babylonian yeshivot discussed in the past four chapters, the caliphate's decline in the middle of the tenth century had not led to a decline in the authority or influence of the Babylonian yeshivot in the Jewish world. After all, the last Babylonian gaon revered by Jews worldwide was Hayya Gaon, who held the gaonate during a time of political fragmentation and was revered by Jews in Fatimid, Byzantine, and Umayyad territories.

If anything, there was an inverse relationship between long-distance Abbasid political power or potential power and the *halakhic* authority of the Babylonian yeshivot. In places where the Abbasid Caliphate had political power or the potential to exercise such power, Jewish leaders opposed Babylonian authority most forcefully. Even though Egypt and some Indian Ocean port cities were technically under Fatimid control during the Seljuq period, they were close enough to Iraq that Babylonia continued to represent a potential threat to the independent authority that Egyptian rabbinic leaders tried to wield. Similarly, once connections between Iraq and the

Western Mediterranean were reestablished, Sephardic Jewish leaders responded forcefully against Babylonian claims. Most significantly, Maimonides articulated the strongest challenge to Babylonian authority in 1178 while residing in Egypt while Egypt and Iraq were united under the authority of the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad. By contrast, it was the Jewish communities of northern France and the Rhineland, never subject to Abbasid political rule and far from the Mediterranean travel zone, who most revered the Babylonian geonim and extolled their spiritual authority.



## Conclusion

This dissertation has demonstrated that Jewish communal institutions and the political institutions of the Muslim society in which Jews lived were much more closely aligned than traditional historiography has led us to believe. Rather, the power of Jewish leaders depended on the support of Muslim leaders, and the claims to authority that Jewish leaders made held meaning precisely because of the relationship between these claims and the Islamic political milieu in which they were asserted. As we traced relations between various Jewish communal institutions and the Abbasid state over four successive political regimes, we have seen how changes in Islamic political life impacted both the points of connection between Jewish communal leaders and the Abbasid state and the ways in which rabbinic leaders advanced their own spiritual authority.

During the first third of the tenth century, the relatively strong Abbasid state under the caliph al-Muqtadir facilitated the rise of a small group of Jewish *jahbadhs* at the Abbasid court who used their connections to long-distance mercantile networks to exchange different kinds of coins in the state treasury and lend money to the state. With their access to state power, Jewish *jahbadhs* courtiers came to accept petitions on behalf of Jews and present them before the caliph. They also came to play a role in the administration of the Babylonian yeshivot, interceding between the geonim and the Abbasid state during intra-communal conflicts. Rather than viewing the involvement of the gentile government as a problem, the rabbis very much took pride in their close relations with the state, and they used their proximity to state power to advance their authority and prestige among Jews outside of Baghdad.

The political fragmentation of the Buyid period in the middle of the tenth century led to a proliferation of provincial courts throughout Iraq and the Mediterranean, many of which employed Jewish officials. Despite their vulnerability to arbitrary raids, Jewish *jahbadhs* were relatively integrated into elite Buyid social networks, and they were able to network with a wide variety of high-placed individuals throughout the Mediterranean. The yeshivot, though deprived of a relationship with a centralized political power, were able to take advantage of long-distance mercantile networks to communicate with their followers in communities far from Baghdad and perform favors for them, ensuring that connection with the yeshiva would continue to yield concrete benefits for their followers. Ultimately, however, the geonim asserted that connections with gentile political power were irrelevant to the yeshiva's claims to authority over Jews worldwide. In doing so, they derived their spiritual authority from their separation from the corruptions inherent in political life.

During the Seljuq period, the status of Jewish court bankers declined, as the '*ulamā*' became more prominent in state administration and tried to marginalize dhimmī government officials (and *dhimmīs* in general) as much as possible. By the end of the eleventh century, with the decline in status and influence of Jewish court bankers, the exilarch had become the definitive representative of the Jewish community at court. Unable to appeal to the state during times of intra-communal conflict as they once had, Jews expressed their political frustrations in messianic terms. The communal leadership responded with a clear anti-messianic message in favor of quiet acquiescence to the state.

After the defeat of the Seljuqs, the ideological and administrative reforms of the later Abbasid caliphs promoting centralized rule also had the effect of incorporating more Jewish notables into the orbit of state administration and Abbasid courtly life. This manifested itself,

most significantly, in the granting of investiture to the geonim. This also impacted the internal life of the Jewish community. The geonim depended on the government to protect their own autonomy and control over those individuals subject to their *reshut*, and they construed service to the Abbasid state as equivalent to service to the yeshiva. At the same time, the granting of investiture meant that the geonim could make the argument for eliminating the position of exilarch altogether. The close ties with the state led Jewish leaders in Iraq in the early thirteenth century to extol the Abbasid state and those who served it.

This diachronic analysis reveals the fluid nature of medieval rabbinic institutions of leadership. On the one hand, the rabbinic yeshivot and the exilarchate continued to operate in Iraq throughout the period discussed in this dissertation. On the other hand, there was a great deal of variation in how they related to each other and how they advanced claims for their own authority in the Jewish world a result, in part, of the changing nature of their relationship with the gentile state. In the early Abbasid period, for example, Natan Ha-Bavli described the exilarch as sitting on a throne flanked by two geonim during a dramatic ritual of investiture at the Babylonian synagogue. Even when a gaon and exilarch excommunicated each other, each had appointed a counter-exilarch and a counter-gaon, respectively. Yet during much of the Buyid period, only one yeshiva was in operation, and Sherira Gaon claimed the Davidic ancestry of the exilarch for himself. In the early Seljuq period, an exilarch took control of the yeshiva, solicited halakhic queries, and asserted Babylonian geonic prerogatives. Soon thereafter there was apparently a separate gaon once more. When the Babylonian gaon received investiture in the late-twelfth century, he argued against the position of exilarch altogether; in response, the exilarch, who had advanced Babylonian claims to halakhic supremacy, instead allied his office with Maimonides, who denied the halakhic authority of Babylonia altogether.

Yet despite this fluidity, we can make some generalizations about Jewish political life throughout this period. First, throughout a period of 350 years, a small group of Jewish officials, many of whom were from the same families, served as Abbasid financial administrators. During this time, Jewish *jahbadhs* continued to play a central role in mediating between Jews and the Abbasid state and in administering the Babylonian yeshivot. The relative continuity in the employment of Jewish *jahbadhs* in Abbasid administration, even when other *dhimmī* government officials converted en masse to Islam, suggests that the connections to long-distance Jewish mercantile and credit networks upon which Jewish *jahbadhs* relied may have been relatively stable across generations, despite the vicissitudes of pre-modern political life.

Second, there was a “royal alliance” of sorts in the Islamic world. In all of these political contexts, Jews sought out relations with the highest echelons of power. In exchange for paying taxes, Jews expected the caliph to protect them and address their grievances. But this principle manifested itself in different ways in the Islamic world. Most notably, appealing to the caliph was not a sign of Jewish political differentiation as it might have been for Jews in Christian Europe. Rather, in petitioning the caliph directly in the classical Abbasid period, Jews declared themselves to be servants of the caliph—and in doing so, they behaved exactly like his Muslim subjects.

Rabbinic leaders came to expect the state to enforce their rule and, often through the intercession of Jewish government officials, invited the state to intervene in intra-communal conflicts. Only when a centralized state was unable to or refused to do so, as during the Buyid and Seljuq periods, did the rabbis characterize the state and involvement in politics in general in distinctly negative terms.

Nevertheless, even when the Abbasid state was at its strongest, no individual rabbinic leader was able to rule over the Jewish community unopposed, nor was he able to monopolize Jews' access to state power. Jewish elites were able to petition the state against their rivals throughout most of the Abbasid period. During the political fragmentation of the Buyid period, Jewish leaders were still able to appeal to various rival Muslim officials to advance their positions. When, under the Seljuqs, the status of Jewish government officials decreased and Jewish leaders may have been less able to petition the state authorities, they expressed their resistance in messianic terms. Even under al-Nāṣir, when the gaon received caliphal investiture and tried to marginalize the exilarch, the exilarch countered by arguing against the halakhic authority of the Babylonian gaon.

This brings us to an important point about the relationship between Abbasid political power and the exercise of rabbinic authority. Even as the rabbis craved political power and the direct backing of the Abbasid state for their rulings, their spiritual authority was most strongly recognized throughout the Jewish world when they lacked such connections. The caliphate's fragmentation in the middle of the tenth century, for example, had not led to a decline in the authority or influence of the Babylonian yeshivot. Rather, Jews worldwide accepted Sherira Gaon's legitimizing chain of halakhic transmission, composed during a time of political fragmentation, which derived the rabbis' authority from their conscious rejection of the corruptions inherent in political life. Similarly, the Jewish communities of northern France and the Rhineland, never subject to Abbasid political rule, revered the Babylonian geonim and extolled their spiritual authority in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. By contrast, Maimonides articulated the strongest challenge to Babylonian rabbinic authority in 1178 in Egypt, during

which time the Babylonian gaon held investiture from the Abbasid caliph, and Egypt and Iraq were united in the same political realm.

Still, a lot more research remains to be done to clarify the phenomena this dissertation has identified. Who precisely were the *jahbadhs*, what did they do, and how did this change or remain constant over time? A systematic study of Arabic prescriptive literature on *jahbadhs* and all of the Abbasid *jahbadhs* named in Muslim sources could help to illuminate the significance (or lack thereof) of the Jewish *jahbadhs* discussed in this dissertation for Abbasid political history. To what extent was a *jahbadh* a distinctly Jewish or *dhimmī* position in Iraq and in other parts of the Islamic world? What role, if any, did religious differentiation play in Abbasid administration, and how did this change over time? Comparisons of literary sources about *jahbadhs* from Iraq with references to *jahbadhs* in Egyptian papyri (particularly those from the Abbasid period) will yield new insights into what, exactly, a *jahbadh* was and how this position did or did not change over time and in different political contexts.

In contrast to Jewish government officials in other parts of the Islamic world, Jews in Abbasid Iraq never reached the highest echelons of political power. Jews did not serve as viziers, and, unlike their Christian counterparts, they played a minimal role in the shaping of Abbasid courtly culture. A systematic comparison of Jewish and Christian government officials in Iraq and their relations with their respective religious communities will help to yield a more nuanced understanding of the phenomena I discuss in this dissertation and the extent to which they are or are not unique to Jews.

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**EDUCATION**

- Present      PhD Candidate in History, The Johns Hopkins University  
Dissertation: Jews in the Political Life of Abbasid Baghdad, 908-1258  
Advisor: Marina Rustow
- 2016      MA in History, The Johns Hopkins University  
Fields: Medieval Mediterranean and Genizah History (Rustow), Medieval Islamic History (Paul Cobb, University of Pennsylvania), Medieval European History and Historiography (Gabrielle Spiegel), Modern Jewish History (Kenneth Moss)
- 2013      MPhil in Middle Eastern Studies, University of Cambridge  
Thesis: "Geniza Fragments of the Introduction to *Kitāb al-Luma* ' by Jonah ibn Janāḥ"  
Supervisor: Geoffrey Khan
- 2011      A.B., Magna cum Laude, Brown University  
Concentrations in History with Honors and in Medieval Studies

**PROFESSIONAL APPOINTMENTS**

- 2018-      Assistant Professor of Jewish History, Hebrew Union College and Xavier University, Cincinnati

**ACADEMIC PRIZES, FELLOWSHIPS, AND GRANTS**

- 2017-2018      Association for Jewish Studies Dissertation Completion Fellowship
- 2012-2017      Leonard and Helen R. Stulman Jewish Studies Award, Johns Hopkins University
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- 2014      The Offit Fund for the Study of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations in the Premodern World Language Training Grant
- 2013      Islamic Studies Language Training Grant, Johns Hopkins University



2011-2012     Gates Cambridge Scholar, University of Cambridge

## **PUBLICATIONS**

2013            “Origin of Hebrew according to Rabbinic and Medieval Sources,” *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, Ed. Geoffrey Khan (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

## **INVITED TALKS**

2017            “At the Heart of Islamic Empire: the Jews of Medieval Baghdad,” Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati. March 16, 2017.

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## **CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS**

2016            International Congress on Medieval Studies, “‘His fathers are like sheepdogs!’ A Testimony of Jewish Communal Strife in Abbasid Baghdad”

## **RESEARCH EXPERIENCE**

2014-2016     Research Assistant, Princeton Geniza Lab

2014-2015     Research Assistant, NEH/ACLS Funded Project, “Documents and Institutions in the Medieval Middle East” (Johns Hopkins University and Princeton University)

## **TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

The Johns Hopkins University

2015            Teaching Assistant, “Race, Diaspora, Nation, and Politics”

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- 2015            Manfred R. Lehmann Memorial Master Workshop in the History of the Jewish Book, Katz Center for Advanced Jewish Studies
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## **PROFESSIONAL SERVICE**

- 2016-2017    Medieval/European Seminar Coordinator, Johns Hopkins University
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## **LANGUAGES**

Modern Languages: Hebrew, Modern Standard Arabic, Spanish (Proficient); French (Reading)  
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